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A TALL, NARROW-FACED MAN WAS READY TO SPRING LIKE A WILD BEAST
UPON HARLAN HOPE.

OR, GIDEON GALE'S HOT HUSTLE.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "HIRAM HAWK, THE HARLEM
DETECTIVE," "MAJOR BULLION," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BIRD OF ILL OMEN.

THE firm of Hope & Shartle, attorneys,
doing business on Broadway, was well
known.

Harlan Hope had almost reached that age
when lawyers who have made a good deal of
money retire and leave the field to younger
members of the bar, indeed, he had given
out that, in a few months, he would bid adieu
to the profession and proceed to live on the
competency he had acquired.

Amos Shartle had been the active man of the firm of late, and was known as a shrewd practitioner, who never failed to do all he could for his clients.

Harlan Hope was a widower, of long standing, while his partner was a young bachelor, on the sunny side of thirty.

They got along very well together, and it is said that there were no secrets between the partners.

It was rather late one night when Amos Shartle ran up the steps leading to the door of the Hope residence and pulled the bell a little nervously.

He was at once admitted by the "up-stairs" girl, who seemed to recognize him, for she waved her hand toward the library, and left him to seek it with the implied understanding that he would find Mr. Hope there.

The young lawyer entered the large room, well furnished with the best of everything, but the moment he crossed the threshold he stopped, for he saw that his partner already had a caller.

Neither Harlan Hope nor his visitor seemed to pay the least attention to Shartle's presence, for they had their heads close together at the desk and the hand of the old lawyer—he was just sixty—seemed to be clutching a lot of papers tied with a crimson cord.

But the moment the second caller made a slight noise, the stranger turned and gave Amos Shartle a glimpse of his face.

The younger lawyer never forgot that face.

It was long, narrow and stamped with cunning and treachery.

Something about it, indeed, struck Shartle with startling force, and when Hope turned to his partner he lost color and stared, as if alarmed.

"Good-night, Amos," saluted Hope. "I did not know you were here. Take a seat, please. We'll be through in a few moments."

Amos Shartle did not care to intrude upon the privacy which seemed to prevail in the library, and saying that he would step across the hall into the main parlor, vanished and shut the door behind him.

The moment he opened the parlor door he heard some one spring toward him, for the room was filled with shadows, and the next moment he stood face to face with Ruby, the old lawyer's daughter and only heir.

She was a tall, well-formed girl of twenty, with much of her father's make-up, and as she came face to face with Shartle she clasped his arm.

"You came from the library, did you?"

"Yes."

"Is he there yet?"

"There is a man with your father."

"The man with the peaked face and the Satanic eyes?"

"I did not pay much attention to him, but what I saw of him did not favorably impress me."

"I should say not. And his mission to this house? It is simply awful!"

"You know him, then?"

"Never saw him before to-night."

"Is it possible? But he seems to know your father."

"That is the horror of the situation," said Ruby, the color for a moment deserting her face. "That is the danger which menaces, I say!"

"Then—"

"Father never mentioned that man to me, but I know it must be the expected one."

"Why expected?"

Shartle hardly knew what he was saying, for the girl's mien actually frightened him.

"It is a secret with me," she went on, lowering her voice and plancing toward the hall door. "I came across the secret accidentally, but none the less startlingly. I have it here. I will watch the door while you read."

As she finished she drew from her bosom a piece of paper and thrust it into Amos Shartle's hand.

"Go over to the light and read that terrible letter," she said. "I picked it up on the floor of the library the other day;

how he came to lose it is a mystery to me. You will wonder why he did not at once destroy it or hand it over to the police; but he did neither. I haven't slept an hour at a time since finding the terrible writing, and I have heard him pacing the floor of the room over there at all hours of the night."

Shartle had reached the window, where a small stand stood, and bent over the burner there.

The letter was written on a single sheet; the paper was wrinkled and dark of hue, but the writing was as black as ebon, and the large, bold characters stood out before him like a sentence of doom.

He knew that Ruby was watching him breathlessly, that she stood over against the door as a sort of guard, and when he dropped his eye to read the letter he heard her sigh.

It was a strange letter, sure enough, but the young lawyer did not at first glance see anything so terrible about it.

It ran as follows:

"Harlan Hope:—The time has come for the pulling of the last cord, and you will soon feel it. Nightshade will be in the city in a few days and will call on you. Be ready, for this time there is to be no failure, and you know what refusal means. You have prospered and the term of year has expired. NUMBER TEN."

Amos Shartle read quickly, and when he looked up he found the gaze of Ruby Hope riveted upon him.

"Isn't it terrible?" cried the girl, coming over to him on eager tiptoe. "Did you ever read such a threatening message?"

A faint smile came to the young lawyer's lips.

"There is a great deal that is mysterious about this letter," he evasively answered.

"It is the very essence of doom!" was the quick reply. "Nightshade will be in the city in a few days. Isn't he in there now?" and she pointed toward the library.

"Do you think so?" queried Shartle.

"Why not? You saw him—Nightshade, with the cadaverous face and the lucifer eyes. Don't you think the name fits him like a coat? I looked for his cloven feet, but he had concealed them."

"Do you think your father suspects the loss of this letter?"

"I can't say. Something has troubled him ever since I found it. He may have missed it—I cannot say, but I know that the visit of Nightshade has filled him with a nameless dread."

Amos Shartle looked again toward the door, and for a moment seemed on the eve of going thither.

"The moment I saw that man I said to myself that 'Nightshade' had come. And the pulling of the cord? What means that but death? We must save my father!"

It was an appeal, a suggestion, which went to the bottom of Shartle's heart, and he looked at Ruby Hope with eyes filled with wonder and pity.

"Hark! he's coming away now!" cried the girl, as they heard a door open. "The conference is over and the die is cast! I know it! I would like to know what took place between them, yet I feel that I cannot listen. I even dread to know it!"

There were footsteps in the outer hall and the young lawyer instinctively leaned toward the wall for the purpose of catching a word or two.

"Remember!" said a voice beyond the door. "There is to be no backing down. The cord is in the hands of its master!"

"I know that," replied Harlan Hope. "I will not falter."

"See that you do not!"

Footsteps moved toward the front door, and as it opened and shut Shartle sprang to the front window and parted the curtains.

He saw the tall figure of the old lawyer's visitor on the steps; he noticed that the long, thin face wore a look of devilish victory, and the young lawyer was watching it, when a dull noise alarmed him.

"Father has fallen!" cried Ruby Hope, bounding toward the hall door, the other at her heels.

They entered the library together.

The girl had guessed rightly, for the body of the old attorney lay on the carpet, unconscious.

With a sharp cry, the daughter bent over and tried to lift him, a task beyond her powers, for her father was a well-preserved and large man.

Amos Shartle lifted the body of his partner and dragged it to the armchair at the desk, where he placed the still unconscious man.

"I can take care of him, now. Go and follow that man—Nightshade," exclaimed Ruby. "Iva and I will bring him back to life, for it seems to be nothing more than a fainting fit. Go and keep that fiend in sight. Track him down, no matter who he is or where he goes, keep him under surveillance!"

Amos had thought of this very thing, and was glad to hear such peremptory words from the lawyer's child.

With another glance at the white-faced occupant of the chair, he was about to turn away when Harlan Hope opened his eyes.

He saw Shartle at the chair and put out his hand.

"Is he gone?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," answered Ruby. "The man—the fiend, I should say, is not here now."

A long breath parted that old man's lips.

"He came in upon me so suddenly—I did not look for him so soon—"

"You expected him, then?" broke in the daughter, with a swift glance at Shartle. "You did not think he would come to-night, then?"

"I did not. Shartle, when did you come in?"

"Just now," answered Amos, believing that his former visit to the library had been forgotten by his partner. "I did not get to see your guest."

"Didn't, eh?" and a look of thankfulness came into Hope's eyes. "Well, you didn't miss very much, Shartle, old boy. I'm better now, and if Ruby will bring me a glass of wine it will fix me up in prime shape."

The girl started to obey, when her eyes fell upon something which lay at the foot of the chair occupied by the so-called Nightshade, and Shartle's look catching hers midway, as it were, saw the same object.

In another instant the young lawyer set his foot on that which he had seen and waited for Ruby to come back with the cordial.

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, when the old lawyer was not looking, Shartle's hand dropped to the floor and closed on the little object there.

Ruby came back with the wine, and while opening the bottle she managed to say to Shartle:

"He is standing on the corner. In a few moments it may be too late to follow him."

This was enough. Amos Shartle leaned toward his partner and said, hurriedly:

"You're all right now, Harlan. It was nothing but a little nervousness. You should carry out your design to visit the hills. I'll drop in again to-morrow and we'll consult about that Conway matter. Ruby here will look to your comfort. Good-night."

Shartle had to break away from the hand that sought to detain him, and was followed to the door by the gaze of the old man.

"Don't go, Shartle!" cried he, imploringly. "For God's sake, don't leave me in the shadow of death."

Perhaps Shartle did not hear the last appeal, for he shut the door and bounded into the hall, running thence to the front door and springing out upon the steps.

He looked toward the nearest corner, but saw no one standing there; then, with sudden resolution, he sprang away, determined to overtake this bird of ill omen, the man, or fiend, believed to be the "Nightshade" of the mysterious letter.

CHAPTER II.

IN HANDS OF IRON.

Mr. Amos Sharle, though a good lawyer, was no detective.

He had never studied the art of tracking people after dark, therefore he missed his man.

Perhaps if he had not gone into the library after hearing his partner fall, he might have followed the bird of evil, but as it was, he did not get to see him any more.

This chagrined the young attorney a good deal, and he was forced to admit that Nightshade had eluded him.

If he had been a practiced beagle, if he had been the man who is destined, in a little while, to come into our veritable drama of city life and mystery, his hunt might have been crowned with success; as it was he was obliged to give up the chase, completely baffled.

As for the man who had called on Harland Hope, he did not seem to care whether he was followed or not; certainly he seemed to make no effort to get away unwatched.

He had stopped a while at the nearest corner as if to get his bearings, and during this time was observed by some half a dozen people.

When he started off, at last, his hands buried in the depths of his pockets, he walked with a steady, half-swinging gait.

Not long thereafter he turned abruptly up a flight of stone steps and opened a front door.

There was no light in the hallway beyond this door, but the man with the caudacious face, whose only ornament was a somewhat heavy mustache, found another door in the dark.

This he pushed open, and, leaning into a room, listened.

"That you, Sam?" said a voice, and the same moment a person stretched out on a sofa set against the furthest wall rose to a sitting posture.

"I'm back!"

Harland Hope's caller, stepping in the room, closed the door and at the same time the occupant of the sofa, arising, filled the room with light by pressing a button in the wall.

"I was napping it a little, but I'm as fresh as a daisy."

The speaker was a well-dressed and strikingly handsome person, with a full face and lustrous eyes. "You're back, I see, and in a short time. Didn't you find him at home?"

The long-faced man grinned.

"The bird was in the nest. I found him at home."

"Well?"

"I told him all there was to say."

"You missed nothing, eh? Not even mention of the little episode at the Springs?"

"I found a place for that, don't forget it!" was the rejoinder. "I carry out my commissions to the letter."

"I know that, but the Springs incident was so trivial in some people's minds that I thought you might overlook it."

"Not I."

Sam helped himself to a cigar from a well-filled box on the table and lighting it, began to smoke.

The other watched him like a hawk.

"How did he receive you?"

"Fairly well."

"Didn't threaten to call in the police, did he?"

"No."

"Did he say he got the letter?" was the next question.

"Not exactly, but from what he did say I inferred that he got it."

"Didn't have it lying around loose, I guess."

"I should say not. By the way, he's handsome yet, isn't he?"

"Strikingly so. Do you know that he's said to be the best preserved vulture of the bar in New York?"

"Never heard that, but I don't see why he shouldn't be considered so. Lives like a king, too."

"Of course. He can afford to live thus on what's around him."

"I never saw anything like it. Books

everywhere and pictures that must have cost a king's ransom."

"Why, Sam, I can sweep it all away in a moment. I can wave my hand and all the riches you saw to-night will tumble into my lap."

"Then, in Heaven's name, why don't you wave it?"

"Wait! It will come our way by and by."

"You're sure of that, Major?"

"Sure? Am I sure of breathing another minute in this house? Well, I should say so! What he owns is mine if I say the word."

"You're a wonderful man."

"I'll admit that, Sam, if it is a little egotistical. Did he have his nerve with him?"

"A good deal of it, sir."

"When did he seem to lose a little of it?"

"When I told him that you would probably ask for the cancellation of the red debt."

"He quavered a little then, did he?"

"Suddenly, as if a storm wave had swept over his heart, but he controlled his spirits in a minute, and was as calm as ever, though his face was as white as a cadaver's."

"Where did you see him? In the parlor?"

"No, in the library."

"You found him there, did you?"

"Yes, the girl—"

"His daughter, Sam?"

"No, the maid. I got but a glimpse of Ruby—I believe that's what they call his child."

"You saw her, then? What's she like?"

"You've seen her, Major; don't you remember, the other day, in the park?"

"Yes; but what does she look like after night in the glare of her father's lamps?"

"They don't rob her of any beauty, you may depend on that, Major. She was just as pretty to-night as when we saw her in the park the other day. It seems almost too cruel to—"

The speaker stopped suddenly and caught the dark eyes scanning him.

"What were you going to say? Say it. Don't mind."

"It struck me as being a little on the cruel order to give that fair girl any pain. She can't help what her father has done—"

"Pshaw! don't get chicken-hearted at this stage of the game. It won't do, Sam. You'll need all your nerve in the near future; you'll want all the courage you've got, and a pretty face mustn't stop you now."

"I don't intend that it shall. I only remarked that I was struck by the face I saw in Harlan Hope's house."

For a moment the other one toyed with the ashes on the end of his cigar and then looked over to his emissary.

"You didn't see the safe, eh?"

"I did not."

"Wasn't it in sight?"

"It certainly could not have been in the library."

"It must be there. Where else would the man be likely to keep it?"

"In his sleeping chamber, perhaps."

"Not likely, Sam. I believe the treasure is somewhere in the room where you interviewed him, hidden behind a bookcase, perhaps."

"Of course, I couldn't see behind the furniture, but I used my eyes while in the house."

"I don't doubt that."

"He did not betray the presence of a safe by a glance which I could detect."

"No? Well, we'll take another look. You will have to go back, but not just now."

Sam, the go-between, made no reply, but fell back and gazed a moment at the handsome face before him.

"Would you let me ask you a question, Major?" he said, suddenly, removing his cigar.

"Certainly, Sam, I'll answer it if I can."

"Oh, I think you can, for if you cannot there isn't an answer this side of the grave."

"Well, go ahead."

The listener took a long breath and seemed to lean toward the man now again sitting on the sofa.

"No, I guess I'll not put the question," said Sam.

A smile came to the other's face.

"You won't, eh? Suit yourself, but since you started out so eager to get a little information you might proceed."

But Sam seemed to "draw in his horns," for he shut his lips hard and bit the cigar half through.

"Harlan Hope bears his years pretty well, doesn't he?" asked the Major, after a pause.

"Royally well, and he seems as stout as a horse."

"He always was."

"You've known him for a long time, haven't you?"

"He's no stranger to me," smiled the Major. "He's been known to me a few years."

"And you're his enemy?"

A frown came to the face of the man on the sofa, and the other watched it until it faded.

"His enemy? Do I have to be that?"

"I would say so. If you were friends you wouldn't have sent me to the old lawyer's house."

"Perhaps not."

The Major rose and crossed over to his companion.

"You did pretty well, though you should have found the safe. You will go there again."

"When? To-night?"

"No, not to-night. I'll send for you when you are wanted. You can go now."

"I may slip out of your hands," laughed Sam—Sam Cerberus he was called.

"You slip out of my hands? I'd like to see you try it!"

"Don't trust me too far. You don't know what I might do."

"Anything but that," was the quick retort. "I say slipping off is the last thing you will do."

Sam's gaze went to the floor and rested there.

"It's true—My God, it's true!" he said, inaudibly. "I can't do that. I can no more get away from this man than I can fly. Bound hand and foot, and manacled to this terrible master—sworn to do his bidding, even to kill at the uplifting of his hand—I am in the toils till one or both of us are no more."

All the while the Major was watching the silent man.

"What's that?" suddenly cried Sam Cerberus, starting, as footsteps were heard beyond the door.

Already the Major had sprung across the room and had turned the key.

"Tis she—Tis the woman in gray! I want to see her. I will see her—Now!"

But the excited Cerberus did not reach the door.

"She isn't coming in here," coolly said the Major, warningly.

"Because you won't let her," was the reply. "You will not let me see her face to face."

"You are right. You can't see her—not yet, at any rate."

"I'll betray you if you don't open the door and let me see her."

"You will, eh? You'll play Judas, will you? You won't do anything of the kind, old man."

Sam Cerberus trembled and his face grew white with ill-suppressed rage.

"Open that door," he repeated, almost fiercely.

"Not now. There, she has gone back!"

With the spring of a lion Cerberus landed against the door, but the hand of the other pushed him back.

"Time is coming when you may see her, and stand face to face with her, but you can't to-night. You can't until you have served me to the end."

"You mean, until I've reddened my hands with human blood?"

"Perhaps, old fellow. You must not forget the oath of the tenth. You sold yourself to me when you took it."

"Not to you alone, but to Satan as well!" was the agonized reply.

CHAPTER III.

A BRACE OF THUNDERBOLTS.

Amos Shartle sat alone in his office. It was the day after his adventure at the home of his partner, and he had acknowledged to himself that the man called "Nightshade" by Ruby Hope had outwitted him.

He had vanished as if the streets of New York had opened and swallowed him.

In vain had he exerted all his wits, the man had escaped, and he was debating what to do.

Harlan Hope had not come down, and the afternoon was speeding, but this was nothing out of the common run of office events.

The senior member of the firm of Hope & Shartle frequently left the whole management of the business to the younger man, and for days at a time Amos had the whole thing on his shoulders.

But, just at this particular time, the young lawyer was thinking about the occurrences of the past night, and again they came up in his mind as fresh as if they had taken place that very day.

Fortunately he had no callers of any moment, and so had the whole afternoon to himself. He had come to the conclusion to call at the Hope residence on his way up-town and see if his partner was in any manner indisposed.

He had also concluded to close the office a little earlier than common, and to this end had just put the important papers in the safe, when the door opened, and Amos looked up to see standing at the door Miss Ruby herself.

She came forward with a pale face, and displayed rather prominently the satchel which she carried.

Amos motioned the lawyer's daughter to a chair, and, leaning back in his own, hastened to ask her how her father came on.

"I cannot tell you," said Ruby. "I feel though, that some terrible calamity overshadows him."

"In what way, Miss Ruby?"

"It's about the visitor he had last night—the mysterious man whom I called Nightshade. I am not now so sure that he is the 'Nightshade' mentioned in the note, but he must be in some manner connected with that fiend in human shape."

"Mr. Hope has not explained?"

"Far from it. He avoids all conversation which might draw him out in regard to that man," was the reply. "I have tried to engage him in a talk which would lead up to the events of last night, but he baffles me at every turn."

"How did he rest?"

"It must have been no rest at all. I believe I heard him at all hours of the night pacing the floor in his room, for Iva and I got him to quit the library after your departure. You did not find the man, I suppose?"

Amos was obliged to confess that he had been baffled.

"I suspected as much. You are not a trained tracker, Mr. Shartle. You should have been a detective to keep that man in sight, for his looks and movements told me that he is a cunning wretch who understands how to vanish at the right time."

"I have not given up the search. I intend to take the trail again, and I will not be alone on it."

"Be careful whom you summon to your aid. Make no mistake, and let your helper be one who will not betray us, but who will keep our little secret inviolate. We must not tell father that we have taken it upon ourselves to find the man who came to him last night. That would trouble him the more. We will set about to find this man—to unravel the mystery of that letter and establish the identity of 'Nightshade'."

"It shall be done," replied Amos Shartle, confidently. "You did not bring me any word from your father?"

"On the contrary, I am the bearer of a very important communication."

Ruby turned to the little hand satchel which she had placed on the table beside her, and opened it.

The young lawyer watched her closely

while she took out a package which he could see had been carefully put up, and tied and sealed.

"Father must have been at work on what is here nearly all last night and part of this forenoon," she went on, pushing the package toward Amos. "You will perceive that the package is sealed as well as tied, and the letter which he scrawled off just before placing it in my hands will tell you, perhaps, what is to be done with it."

Amos took first the letter which fell from Ruby's hand as she finished, and opened it.

Its contents were brief, and in a moment he had mastered them, as follows:

"Please deposit this package in the lower 'safe,' and guard as you would your life. I am in the shadow, and believe that my time is near at hand. Don't let a soul witness the hiding of this package, and see that it remains in the receptacle till called for or until after my death.

"H. H."

When Amos Shartle looked up he found the gaze of Ruby Hope fastened upon him.

"Did he show you this letter?" asked the lawyer.

"He did not, and I believe I would rather remain in ignorance of its contents. Please don't let me see it, Mr. Shartle. I am willing to let you keep the secret."

Amos put the letter into a drawer, while he drew the package toward him.

"Father will go to pieces unless the strain is broken, or the shadow removed," remarked Ruby. "It is simply terrible to hear his measured steps as he paces the carpet, now and then stopping when he reaches the front window, as if he dreads the return of that fiend in flesh and blood."

"We must break this strain. We must break it as soon as possible, and I will summon this evening to our assistance the man who can unravel the mystery if it can be unravelled by human agency."

"Who is that man—a detective?"

"He is a detective, and I believe we could call to our aid no one more capable of dealing with this matter than Gideon Gale, or Gotham Gid, as he is called among his intimate friends."

"Go to him! Tell him what is to be done. Consult with this man, Mr. Shartle, and don't spare expense. I have something in my own name, and all of it is at your service. We must work rapidly, for father will break down if he is again subjected to another interview by Nightshade or his agent."

Ruby Hope stood beside her chair, with very little color in her face, but her nerves were calm.

She talked like a person who was determined to go to the end of the matter without regard to her own feelings, and Amos Shartle admired her while he watched her in the last sunlight which came into the window over the tall buildings adjoining.

"You will manage to let me know, will you not?" said Ruby, as she moved toward the door. "If you find this friend of yours and get his views of the matter, you will send me word?"

"Certainly. And should anything important turn up at home you must not fail to communicate with me."

"At once, Mr. Shartle; depend on that," and with a "good-afternoon," the lawyer's daughter took her departure.

When she had gone Amos picked up the package. It seemed to be legal documents and was rather bulky.

But he did not seek to know more, and, displacing his arm-chair alongside the table, he pulled up the mat and stooped over the floor.

A little dent or crack in the floor was disclosed. In this he at once inserted his knife-blade. Running this along the crack, he soon struck iron. Pressing the blade hard, up sprung a square section of the floor, exposing to view an iron box or safe, set firmly in between the heavy floor beams.

The sharpest rogues in the city would never have looked for a depository of that

sort in that spot, and only to the practised eye was the crack itself to be seen.

Shartle placed the package in the iron box, closed the "lift," and replaced the rug and chair.

Harlan Hope had sent his precious property to the safest place in New York, and a thousand thieves, though they were to ransack the place, would not be able to find the repository.

Placing the chair directly over the hidden treasure, Amos began to put in order a few papers preparatory to closing up for the day.

Already, outside, the shadows of the tall buildings had grown longer, and lights were beginning to peep out here and there.

In a few moments night would settle over the city.

As the lawyer moved round the table with his hand on the safe key, which he carried in his pocket, the door swung inward, and a man entered—a stranger, wholly, to the occupant of the office.

He was a person of perhaps forty, his face was cleanly-shaven, his eyes were deep set and sparkling, with a half-hungry, half hunted look, and his gait was not a tread, but like a slip and slide, as if to make his movements noiseless.

"You're Amos Shartle, aren't you?" he demanded.

"That's my name."

"Just so; I'll take it."

The lawyer started violently.

"There, don't stand there and stare at me. I'll take it, I say!"

"But, what'll you have?"

"I'll take the package you put under the floor after the gal went off."

Amos felt a cold thrill shoot through every nerve; he wondered if he could not dash himself upon this intruder and strangle him in his tracks.

"There! That'll do, Mr. Shartle. I don't want to hurt any one, but I want what I've come for. You hear me, eh? I'll take the package."

"But it's not mine."

"Of course it isn't, and that's why I'm here. Yours? You wouldn't have put it under the floor if it was. Walk round the table, please. I prefer having it handed to me by you. You won't, eh? See here, Amos Shartle, what's the use o' playing against a full hand of trumps?" and the lawyer was looking over the table into the menacing muzzle of a revolver!

"Come, now, don't be stubborn! Just obey and deliver!" and the left hand of the stranger closed on the now thoroughly dismayed Shartle's wrist.

It seemed the hand of a fiend from the frigid zone, so cold it was, and clammy as that of a corpse.

Never in all his life had he touched or been clutched by a hand like that!

"I came here for the package. I followed the girl down-town, but didn't get a chance to plunder her, so I'll rob you! Ha! ha! It's under your feet, Shartle. Get it!"

The lawyer was pushed and forced toward the spot in the floor.

The revolver looked him in the face, and he knew it was robbery after death.

The foot of the stranger suddenly kicked the mat aside.

"There's the trap. Open it, Shartle," was the command.

Amos, forced by the cool villain, with no further delay, pried open the little lift in the floor, and the strong box was revealed.

"Now, the key, Shartle! Open the safe, Shartle!"

Impelled by the revolver and that terrible grip, the lawyer did as ordered, and soon the precious packet was in the robber's possession.

"That's all! Good-by, Amos," laughed the thief. "There's nothing like perseverance," and before the intimidated lawyer could move he was alone.

But a moment he stood there; then the courage for action came, and hurriedly locking his office door, he bounded down the stairway, two steps at a time, for the elevator was down.

He reached the lower hallway, and found the elevator boy at the door of his moving prison.

One question was enough. The boy had carried the robber down.

Shartle bolted from the building, but, as well might he have looked for a pin in the dust as to have searched for that human fiend on Broadway.

He came back at last, out of spirits and white-faced.

At his door he was met by a boy who handed him a message.

The lawyer tore it open.

"Come at once," he read. "Father is dead. Iva saw the most of it, and can give us a clew. It is terrible."

"RUBY HOPE."

Thrilled as he had never been thrilled before, Amos thrust the message into his pocket and darted away.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ONE WITNESS.

"Dead!" thought Shartle, as he hastened from the building and rushed toward the elevated station. "It looks like murder, from Ruby's brief note. She says Iva saw it all and can give us a clew. Yes, it must be crime."

Minutes seemed hours to Amos Shartle while he was being whirled to the home of his partner, and, arriving there, he at once pushed open the door and encountered Ruby herself in the spacious hall.

The young girl came forward with a half-suppressed cry, and halted before Shartle.

"What is it?" queried the young lawyer.

"It is death, as I informed you, and it is murder as well!"

"Where is Iva? You spoke of her—"

"You shall see her in a moment; but, first come with me."

She led him into the library, the wide, carved door of which she closed, and then turned upon him, strangely agitated, but trying to be calm.

"The blow fell. It came to him upstairs, and he is there now," she explained. "It all happened while I was out, and before I could get home from delivering the package to you. You put it away, of course?"

A lump seemed to fill Shartle's throat when he thought of the stolen packet, and he looked away.

"I feel that a good deal of important information about this awful tragedy lies in that sealed packet," she went on, without noticing his strange silence. "It may be opened, now that the blow has fallen. But we will not tamper with it until the authorities come."

"What have you done?"

"We have sent for the police. We thought of that the first thing."

"And they have been here?"

"Yes; a sergeant came—a Mr. Dowler—and another plainly-dressed gentleman, who has just gone away. It may have been your detective, Mr. Gale, was it not?"

"Gideon Gale," cried Shartle. "I wish I had come a little sooner."

"But he will be back presently. Iva has been hysterical ever since I came home, but once during her lucid moments she gave me the information which made me add what I did to the message. Father was killed by the man who came here last night."

"By Nightshade?"

"I called him that then, you remember, but I do not believe he is that personage. Let us go up and see how the maid is. It seems to me that she must recover and tell us what she saw from the stairs."

"Oh, she saw it from the stairs, then?"

"Yes. Iva has a room on the last floor, and in coming down the stairs she can, at a certain point, look over the transom into father's private room, where it happened."

Shartle, now eager and ready to meet the girl, accompanied Ruby up the steps.

The house was a large, three-story affair, built by the old lawyer himself and in a manner that suited him, though much against the designs of the well-paid architects.

The servants' apartments were on the last floor, and the main staircase winding down, passed his own door.

"You can see for yourself," said Ruby, as she paused on the stair carpet at a certain place, pointing to the transom of her father's room. "Here is where Iva stopped from what she told me, and from here she saw that which sent her into hysterics."

Shartle looked down into a dimly-lighted room through a transom, and made out a darkish figure lying on a single bed.

"We will go in presently," remarked the lawyer's daughter. "We must see Iva first."

They passed to the uppermost floor, and Ruby led the way to a door, which she opened without knocking.

The light in the room was turned low, and the two advanced, seeing at first nothing; then the outlines of a human figure on a low couch were revealed.

It was the figure of a woman, and the face was turned toward the wall.

"Iva!"

At sound of Ruby's voice the person moved, and a face, rather fair, but at that moment haggard and white, was turned toward the pair.

"This is Mr. Shartle, father's partner," continued the lawyer's child. "You have met him before, I believe."

There was no answer, the thin lips of the maid compressing, and her eyes emitting an intense stare.

"You are better now, Iva, and stronger, I am sure. You will sit up if you wish and tell Mr. Shartle what you saw."

"What I saw! Heavens, no!" cried the maid, with a perceptible shudder. "Don't exact that of me."

"But you know it is in the interests of justice, child. You are the only witness, and your lips must not be sealed on an occasion like this."

"I didn't see much, after all."

"Every little will help tighten the coils round that man. The minutest evidence may prove the very kind we want."

The girl sat up on the edge of the couch and looked for half a minute at the man who awaited her speech.

"I cannot tell how he got into the house, for I am sure I did not admit him. He came like a thief in the night, while I was in this very room dozing. You had gone down-town, Miss Ruby, and I had heard nothing of Mr. Hope for some time, believing that he had quieted his nerve a little, or perhaps had even gone out."

"I awoke with a strange feeling that Mr. Hope and I were not the only people in the house—a presentiment that something had gone wrong. I listened at the door, and thought I could hear the voices of two men, but could not make out just where they were."

"I am no eavesdropper, as Miss Ruby knows, but I was seized with a burning desire to hear something more than a confused hum of voices, so, slipping on my dress, I glided from the room, expecting to steal down to the lower floor. On the stairway the voices grew more distinct, and when I reached a step from which I might look over into Mr. Hope's chamber, I stopped, spellbound."

"The transom was open. It had been thrown up so as to let in the cool air, and I glanced into the room to be almost frozen with horror at the sight I saw."

Here the girl paused, and seemed unwilling to proceed, but the hand of Ruby Hope fell gently upon her arm.

"The whole story, Iva; keep nothing back!" urged the girl.

"The scene is burned into my memory and will remain there while life lasts," then continued the maid. "Mr. Hope stood near the bed, facing a tall, narrow-faced man, who seemed ready to spring upon him like a wild beast. I shall never forget the mein of that desperado. He held in one hand a revolver—cocked, as I could see by the jet—and what he said was hissed, as it were, through clinched teeth.

"It is in this room, and I know it!" cried this man. "You have the safe here, and you must open it." Mr. Hope said nothing in reply, only looked at the villain, who almost touched him, and who seemed about to kill him there and then.

"You won't rob me, surely," Mr. Hope said, at last, and his voice trembled.

"Why not? That's what I came here for. I want it or your miserable, crime-stained life!"

Ruby uttered a cry at this, and leaned toward the girl.

"Did he say that, Iva? Those words imply—my God! I dare not think what they might mean."

"I am sure he used such language, Miss Ruby, though it pains me to repeat it," was the reply. "After that he raised the weapon, but Mr. Hope dashed it aside, and then they came together in a wild, swaying struggle."

"The room, as you will see, shows signs of a struggle," said Ruby, glancing at Amos Shartle.

"I felt my senses leaving me as I witnessed the terrible battle for life. I remember that I fell against the wall along the stairway, and seemed to feel that I was fainting," resumed Iva. "I could hear, and not see, now. I could hear the struggle going on in the room down there, but I could not stir. By and by I came out of the fright and trance and found myself lying on the floor of my own chamber right over there."

"I cannot tell how long a time passed between my adventure on the staircase and my coming out of the swoon. I seemed to be roused by the closing of a door, and, looking up, I saw Miss Ruby staring at me."

Ruby Hope nodded at this, and Iva closed her eyes.

"When the murderer went away, and how, I cannot tell," Iva went on. "I saw nothing after falling against the wall, heard no sound after seeing them grapple for the struggle of life and death."

"But the man?" urged Shartle. "You say he was tall?"

"Tall and agile. I never saw a man like him. His face was peaked and his forehead—I could see it, for he was hatless—was receding like. He was dressed in a suit of dark clothes and wore no cuffs. All these things, which it might have taken some time for one to notice under other circumstances, seemed to photograph themselves on my mind in an instant. I believe I could not have seen more of him if I had looked an hour."

Shartle turned to Ruby.

"It is good evidence; just the kind of clew my detective would ask for. That man, whoever he was, seems to have come and gone without leaving anything behind."

"I cannot tell you what the policeman or the detective may have discovered in the room itself," was the reply, "Shall we go down now?"

Shartle rose, and Ruby turned toward Iva, whose arm she gently touched again.

"You can go to sleep now, child," said she. "I will see to it that you are not disturbed again to-night."

Iva lay down, pressing her face among the pillows, and Shartle and the old lawyer's daughter stole from the room.

At the door of the death-chamber Ruby stopped and was seen to shudder.

Amos laid his hand on the knob, and was in the act of opening the door, when some one appeared at the foot of the stair.

"It is the detective," cried Ruby, looking down. "He has come back, as you see, Mr. Shartle."

The young lawyer looked.

"It is Gale!" cried he, drawing back from the door; then the girl caught his arm quickly.

"You two can go in," said she. "If you will permit I will go to my own room," and without waiting longer she hurried away, and the lawyer waited for the detective to come up.

"You here, Shartle?" cried the man who mounted the stair, and caught sight of the young attorney at the door of the death-room.

"I am here, Gideon."

"Keeping guard, eh?"

"No; I came hither a moment ago with Miss Ruby. She just left me. You've been in there?"

"A few minutes," was the reply. "I came back to take a second survey."

Lawyer and ferret entered the room, and Gale approached the bed.

"You can see what the fiend left behind," he remarked, turning toward Sharle. "The neck is broken—the surgeon on the next street says by a sudden wrench. Only a long, slender hand armed with the strength of Thor could do it."

"Such a hand as the man must have had who was seen by Iva, the maid."

"She has talked, then?"

"She told us the story of what she saw—Ruby and I."

"She wouldn't talk to me, or, at least, she appeared to be too nervous to tell the story. She is shrewd, is Iva, the maid—shrewd beyond the usual run of her kind. But, look here, Amos!" and the detective lifted one of the dead man's hands and turned it to the light.

The lawyer bent forward and inspected it intently for a few moments.

"When did he lose the tip of his thumb? Do you know, Sharle?"

"The—tip—of—his—thumb?" cried the astonished lawyer. "I didn't know he had lost it."

"He never told you, did he?"

"Never! And, what is stranger still, I who have been associated with him in business for five years never missed the tip. Gale, this is a revelation. It almost causes me to doubt that this man is Harlan Hope, my late partner."

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAIL OF THE COLD HAND.

The detective was still holding up the mutilated thumb, and the gaze of Amos Sharle was riveted upon it.

"You don't say positively that Harlan Hope never lost a part of his thumb, eh, Amos?"

"I won't say that, but isn't it strange that I never noticed it?"

"Somewhat strange, of course; but, you see, not much is missing, not near down to the joint, and so—"

"Oh, I'll acknowledge that he may have lost it and I not have noticed. He had a way of keeping to himself little matters which he considered of no importance to the outside world, and this may have been one of them."

"We will question Miss Ruby about this deformity, but not just now," continued the city ferret. "Time enough for that. We will go now, if you please, Amos."

"Without your seeing Iva, the maid?"

"She told you the story, you say? Well, you can repeat it to me while we go down on the car."

Half an hour later the two men, lawyer and detective, occupied chairs in Amos Sharle's office.

"The man whom Iva professes to have seen in the bedchamber with Harlan Hope was not the one who plundered you?" advised the detective.

"I think not. Iva saw a tall, lean-faced person; mine was not so."

"Iva's man wore darkish clothes, while yours was not so clad."

"Exactly."

"Then, judging by the time, as nearly as we can arrive at it, the two visits must have been at nearly the same hour, making it impossible for one man to have been at both places."

"I had thought of that."

"Robbery was the motive at each place, it seems. Iva says that your partner's visitor demanded something supposed to be in the safe, while you were plundered, not killed, like Harlan Hope."

Amos, who had lost not a word, bowed.

Gotham Gid picked up a cigar and lit it musingly.

"You saw the man who was in the library last night. I believe you came in upon him and Mr. Hope unannounced," he remarked.

"I saw him."

"Did he start?"

"Not at all. He was as cool as a cucumber."

"How does Iva's description tally with the man you saw?"

"Fairly well; but the girl may have got a better look at him. He was seated when I saw him."

"Just so."

"Wait," cried Amos, suddenly recollecting something; and, hastening across the room, he opened the office safe, and then came back.

"Here is what I found on the floor of the library after the man's departure. I set my foot on it, and afterward picked it up. It may mean nothing, however."

He handed the detective a polished object.

"You know what it is, Amos?" asked Gale, looking at his friend.

"It is indeed, a shark's tooth; but, see I have seen a good many of them."

"It is indeed a shark's tooth; but, see here! It is a valuable affair, for there is a letter or two on the gold, and they seem to have been well worn."

"I noticed that, but I did not try to make them out."

Gotham Gid leaning toward the light, produced a small magnifying glass, which he brought to bear on the faded letters.

"They are not letters, but a date," said he, without looking up. "I can make out the '18—' Why, it's 1869."

"Nothing more?"

"Not that I can see. You found this tooth where the stranger was sitting when you encountered him in the library?"

"Right where his chair stood."

"We will say that he lost it," suggested the ferret. "We will admit that in some manner it became detached from his chain and fell to the floor. To find the charmless chain would be to discover the man who visited Harlan Hope last night, eh?"

"That's plain," assented the lawyer. "But it looks like hunting for a pin in a wheat-bin."

Gotham Gid said nothing in reply, but looked at the shark's tooth lying in his hand.

"It was a cold hand?" he asked, so suddenly that Amos Sharle started.

"It was ice-cold—perfectly bloodless," he exclaimed. "I remember that it sent a shiver of iciness through my system. I never touched a hand like that. The chill seemed to penetrate to my bones, and I almost shrieked when the fingers gripped me."

"There are few hands like that," averred Gale. "It is not natural. It is a freak of nature. I once came across a man with an ice-cold hand, but he wasn't a mere robber."

"A gentleman, eh?"

"Not exactly that, in every sense of the term. He was a man of courage and coolness, but I can't say that he ever plundered his fellow-man—not, at least, while I knew him."

"What became of him?"

Sharle asked the question mechanically.

"He vanished between two days, and, strange to say, after a little piece of crooked business in which he could not possibly have had a part. Since then I haven't seen Crowley Creepers."

"Was that really his name?"

"I believe it was, strange as it seems. Crowley Creepers used to board near the Battery with an old woman who is still living down there. Mother Trumps—"

"Good names for Dickens," intimated the young lawyer.

"Exactly. This old woman is an anomaly. She is the possessor of more secrets than any other woman in New York, and, what is singular, she keeps them, too. I don't believe she would tell me what became of Mr. Creepers, even if she knew."

"It might not be time lost by looking him up—if he really had a bloodless hand; he and the man we want may be just one and the same," suggested the man of law, always on the alert for evidence.

"I'll do it to-night. Your idea is a good suggestion."

Amos Sharle locked up his office for the second time that day, and went to his lodgings.

The horror of the strange crime overshadowed him.

He felt the terror of it, the thrilling part of Iva's story, in his very soul, and when he thought of the unknown man who had plundered him of the precious documents confided to his care by Harlan Hope, even then in the shadow of death, he resolved

to devote the remainder of his life to their recovery.

At the same time he was forced to admit the improbability of ever getting them back.

The cool-headed thief was somebody's tool; he had robbed for money's sake—for pay—for mere documents could be of no use to a man like him. He must be but an emissary. If so, who was the principal?

That was for the lawyer and detective now to discover.

Then he recurred to the time which elapsed between Ruby's departure for the office and the murder.

Iva had been in her room all the time.

She had dozed there, and might not have heard anything, not even the going out of Harlan Hope, saying that he was out of the house during that time.

"But the most curious thing of all is the maimed thumb," decided Amos. "Why, I've seen that and thousands of times, and if there had been a defect in it I would have noticed it; but—Pshaw! it is there—I saw it to-night, and it only shows that our eyes are not as good as we think they are."

He settled down behind a good cigar, and in a short time fell asleep in the chair.

His last thought was of Gotham Gid on his way to Mother Trumps' house, and he wondered what he would make out of the visit the old secret keeper.

He felt that the murder would excite all New York, that the authorities would take the matter in hand, and that the next day he would read all about it in the newspapers.

Then he wondered how it would affect their practice.

There would have to be a change in the name of the firm.

He thought for a moment of abandoning the profession, now that Hope was dead, for he could afford to do so, having amassed a competency, but the next moment he resolved to remain in the field, "for Ruby's sake," as he phrased it.

Meantime the detective had gone down into the narrow streets in the vicinity of the Battery.

The night was well advanced for the visit to the scene of the crime and afterward to the lawyer's office, for consultation had taken up a good deal of time.

A light wind, redolent with the mixed odors of a city's night, came to him as he pushed on, and he at last turned into a thoroughfare which soon twisted into another like a corkscrew into a cork.

Gotham Gid evidently knew where he was going, for he did not pause until he reached a house with a low doorway and a heavy shutter to one window that looked out upon the street.

"Mother Trumps'," said Gale to himself, as he tapped on the door with his knuckles. "Ten chances to one that I'll find some other bird in the old nest."

He heard no one beyond the door for half a minute, and then the shuffling of feet came to his ears.

The portal opened.

As the ferret of New York stepped inside he heard a voice call out:

"Be keerful, Molly. See who's there before you let the bloke inside."

But Gotham Gid was already across the threshold, and the tall, Amazonian beauty who had admitted him was gazing into his face with a bold expression.

"I'm in," said Gale, with a smile. "No one hurt, either. Where is Mother Trumps?"

The big girl laughed.

"What, don't you know?" she cried. "Mother Trumps, is it? Why, she hasn't lived here for a year."

"You're quite sure of that?" asked Gale. "A year, is it? It seems to me that I saw her here and enjoyed her hospitality within the past six months."

The deep-set eyes of the girl seemed to emit sparks of indignation.

"That's pretty close to disputing my word," said she, drawing up along the wall. "I'll show you, if you care to see."

"Oh, your word'll do. But, what's become of Mother Trumps?"

"Can't tell. We never followed her up after she pulled up and vanished with her traps."

"Who's out there asking about Mother Trumps?" called a voice from a room beyond the end of the hall.

"Never mind. I'm equal to this occasion," responded the girl. "I am portress in this house, and the gentleman will be told all I know about the old lady, which is not much."

"Tell him the truth, Molly."

With this the voice ceased, and the big girl came toward the detective, saying:

"We live here, my husband and I, and Mother Trumps, of whom I have heard, moved out as we slid in. I'm sorry, but I can't tell you what became of her. Want to see her real bad, don't you?"

"Not particularly so."

"Just bad enough to call, eh?" grinned the young woman. "I know how you feel. Good-night, sir."

She spoke in an overtone, and at the same moment the detective threw a rapid glance down the dimly-lighted hall.

At the same instant the other door opened, and a human face appeared there.

It was withdrawn in the twinkling of an eye, but the light was strong enough to enable the detective to note the features and to see the broad shoulders which had been injudiciously thrust forward.

"Good-night," he responded to the woman's parting. "I'm sure you would give me the information I want if you could."

"Certainly, sir. Good-night."

The detective found the door between him and the street, and on the step a smile passed over his face.

"It wasn't such a water haul, after all. That young woman is Molly Brass, and the face I saw at the other door was the face of Crowley Creepers. It's in the nature of a ten-strike," and with this observation the detective of New York walked away.

Had he already run down the man with the cold hand?

CHAPTER VI.

OLD CHOLLY'S STORY.

Gideon Gale, the ferret, was inclined to rejoice over his trip to the house formerly occupied by Mother Trumps.

If he had not found the object of his search, he felt that at least he had seen a face which recalled Crowley Creepers, and he resolved to keep the man in sight.

The detective had two strings to his bow.

He was expected to unravel the mystery connected with the death of Harlan Hope as well as to discover the person who robbed Amos Shartle in the Broadway office.

While it was possible that the two crimes were, in some mysterious manner, connected, it was equally possible that the same brain had planned both.

Who was the planner? Whose head had directed the hands and where was the ruling spirit of the conspiracy to be found?

It was a case which promised to give the shrewd detective a good deal of work, but he began with his usual vim.

A short time after his departure from Mother Trumps' former home he might have been seen crossing the Battery, where hundreds of overheated human beings were to be found enjoying the scenes there and the air which came up over the Bay.

Gideon Gale had a mission there, else he would not have turned suddenly into a street which took him thither and kept it till he found himself beneath the trees.

He walked straight to a certain part of the park and touched on the shoulder an old man who had taken possession of one of the benches.

"You, Mr. Gideon?" exclaimed the old loiterer, as he raised himself and showed the detective a dark face, which was covered with the stubby beard of the last three days.

At the same time he made room for the detective, who dropped beside him and laid one hand on his knee.

"It's me, Perley—"

"There, don't call me by that name. It brings up too many memories which I would rather bury than look at," was the interruption.

"Very well. You don't grow much older. What's become of Mother Trumps?"

"Don't you know?" and the peaked face of the old man was thrust almost into the detective's.

"Really, I haven't kept run of her of late. But she isn't at the old nest."

"You've been there, have you?"

"Just come away."

"And they told you—Molly and her friend—"

"Yes, they said she was gone, but there the information ended."

"And you've come to me to tell you where Mother Trumps is?"

"Certainly."

The detective's companion looked away for a moment, but all at once he turned upon him.

"I can lay my hand on Mother Trumps within thirty minutes," he said, with a grin. "She may get away from you man-hunters and baffle the police, but she can't hide from me—no, not from me."

"You've kept track of her, then?"

"What else do I live for?" cried the old fellow. "Why, that's about the only pleasure I have left in life—keeping track of that old woman."

"The old grudge, I see, Per—Cholly, I mean."

"That's better. Let it be Cholly from now on. No, sir; it's not so much the 'old grudge,' as you call it, as a desire to see that some day she helps to set things right. Don't I know the old secret-keeper? Don't I know the woman who holds in her hands my character and who, if she had gone to my lawyer at a certain time—to Harlan Hope, who stood by me to the last—could have washed me clean and given me a new lease on life? I don't forget these things, Mr. Gideon. I can't. That's why I keep track of Mother Trumps; that's why I follow her wherever she goes, and I intend to do it till she tells the truth or goes down into the grave."

The old man spoke with a determination which went to the heart of the listener, and for a minute the detective saw his eyes fill as they were riveted upon the ground at his feet.

"She may relent some day," said Gideon."

"Whether she does or not, I know that I am innocent, and so does she."

"Watch her, then, and see that she breaks her silence."

"I intend to, sir. I intend to drag her before Harlan Hope the moment she relents, and my lawyer, whom I have known these fifty years—we were boys together, you know—will see that her reparation does me good."

"Yes," said the ferret, catching at Cholly's last words, "I believe you were boys together."

"That's it, and he was the pink of honor. He was a man after honor's own soul, and but for that one misstep he would to-day be as clean as the robe of a seraph."

"What was that, Cholly?"

"Didn't I never tell you?" and the face of the old park loiterer seemed to grow sad.

"Never."

"Perhaps I shouldn't open up the past at this time, when he is going down the hillside of life, and when all New York believes that no stain attaches to his garments. I'll bet my head that his young partner knows nothing of it, to say nothing of the pure young girl whom he calls his child."

"It was not criminal, eh, Cholly?"

"It was pretty black, but I always maintained that he was as innocent as a babe. It was this way: I suppose it was forty years ago, when he was about twenty, with a bright career opening up before him. His father lived in the heart of Virginia, and he had just come back from college.

"The night after he got home an old servant was found choked to death in his room. It was a terrible crime, for there

was evidence of premeditation and cold-bloodedness about it. You see, sir, the young man and the servant had had words prior to Harlan's last return to college, and I heard him say that when he came back they would settle the difficulty forever.

"But I am here to say with my last breath, if necessary, that he didn't do it. True, they found his knife on the floor of the room and a bit of cashmere on the sloping roof over which the murderer must have crawled to the old man's room—true, that piece of goods matched a pair of pantaloons found afterward in his private chamber; but I am here to say that he didn't strangle the old servant—old Manoah.

"Oh, I know what you man-hunters would say with such evidence before you. I know that it was damning, and all that—that nothing, as it were, was wanting to complete the chain of testimony; very well. It wasn't my friend's work."

"Did he do anything?—prove an alibi, Cholly?"

"Good God! he didn't stop to prove anything, but the night after the murder he sloped and never from that day to this has he crossed the threshold of the old house. That looked black, didn't it? That was the verdict at the time; they were almost ready to lynch him, and would have done so had he come back. But he never came back.

"You see he changed his name. He went first to Europe with money furnished him by his father, who died soon afterward, leaving him the whole estate, with the exception of a small portion which he left to a brother then at large somewhere—a sort of rolling stone, who had disgraced the family name.

"When my friend came back to America, he went into business. He prospered, and you don't think the Lord would let a murderer make money hand over fist and become happy?"

"It doesn't look so, Cholly."

"That clinches the belief that he never killed the old man in Virginia. There was another hand in the muss—a hand that ever had been turned against Eric Lee, because a pretty face had come between the two. Now, I don't say that Fergus Finch or 'Dandy' Finch, as we called him, did the deed—remember, I make no accusations, for the grave long ago closed over him—but when I afterward picked up in the room where the deed was committed a picture of Rosa, the cause of the rivalry, knowing that it was not the one Eric Lee had, I began to see light where all had heretofore been dark."

"Fergus Lee, so it was said, was killed in a duel in New Orleans, with a creole in the case this time, and a year later Eric Lee became Harlan Hope for good. He was then rising at the bar, and I occasionally visited him. I preferred to be a loafer to living in the style he offered to keep me in for old times' sake. I refused his kind offers, though he has seen that I have never suffered for the necessities of life."

"He will champion my cause whenever I can wrest the truth from Mother Trumps. I was once arrested for a petty theft, and that woman, who never liked me—she was one of the servants on the old estate when the old servant was strangled—could have cleared me. But she would not. I have been her shadow for years—waiting for her to come down to her deathbed, but waiting against hope, as it seemed. My God! is she going to live till Gabriel blows his trumpet? Must I go first and let her glory in keeping back the truth which prevents me from coming out into the sunlight and holding up my head with the purest?"

"It's bad enough, Cholly," said the detective. "Now, if you will tell me where to find Mother Trumps—"

"Won't I, though?" ejaculated the old man. "See here. I went up to Harlan's last night, not to the office, but to the house, and I went again to-night. Haven't been back very long."

Gideon Gale started a little.

"You saw him, did you?" he inquired.

"No. I thought I would sooner call at the office to-morrow. I didn't ring the bell. My feet, which carry the grime of the streets of New York, would soil his carpets, though he wouldn't care a straw so long as it was old Perley."

The old man dropped his voice to a whisper and spoke his real name.

"He has strange visitors at night, Harlan does," he went on. "I saw one quit the house soon after I got there. He slipped out like a thief and came toward me. I don't know why, but a singular thrill seemed to shoot through me and I fell back against the next house and hugged the wall with my heart in my throat."

"You see this is what startled me: There was something terribly familiar about the face of the man who came out of Harlan Hope's house to-night. It carried me back to Virginia times and brought me once more face to face with the crime of 'the night of the sixth,' as we used to call it when speaking of the servant's death. My God! I lived the whole thing over again while that man approached me."

"You thought you had seen him before, eh, Cholly?"

"I did. I don't wish to do any one harm, but that man's face nearly drove me mad. If 'Dandy' Finch hadn't died in that duel, I would say that it was him."

"The man you saw come out of the old lawyer's house?"

"Yes, yes."

"Had he a long face-peaked, with a thin nose, a little hooked?"

"Not that man! That wouldn't be at all like Dandy Finch. He was better built than that. I never knew but one man of the kind you describe, and I haven't seen him for years. It was Sam Cerberus, a cunning duck, who didn't belie his name; but the man who came out of Harlan Hope's house to-night was the ghost of Dandy Finch, the old rival. But the dueling pistol finished him, as Mother Trumps could tell you. Gods! how he scared me, though!"

"Did you follow him, Cholly?"

"Not far. Around the first corner he jumped into a cab and was off in a jiffy."

"What time was that?"

"I remember hearing the clock on the next square striking six just as I lost sight of the cab."

Gideon Gale drew back a little and looked at the face in the lights of the Battery.

What fortune had directed him to old Cholly?

What fate had placed this story of the past and the present into his hands?

He leaned toward the old man, and said, in low tones:

"Thanks, Cholly. You may become the means of avenging your friend's death."

"My friend's death? You don't mean—"

"Harlan Hope has been murdered."

Old Cholly pitched from the bench with a wailing cry.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOLF THAT FOLLOWED.

The old man fell heavily on his face, but in another moment the detective had lifted him and was looking down into his white face.

"Dead, you say, Mr. Gideon?—my old friend and helper?"

Old Cholly was the picture of despair while he looked into the ferret's face and hung on each word as he replied:

"I did not think it would shock you so, Cholly. Harlan Hope is dead—murdered—and you may be the means of bringing the assassin to justice."

"Won't I if I can?" cried the old man through shut teeth. "Won't I tighten the noose about the neck of the base villain? Killed? Not in his own house?"

"Nowhere else, Cholly."

"When?"

"To-night."

"And I may have seen the murderer come from the scene of his crime. He

may have passed within reach of my hands and with the blood of Harlan Hope in his skirts. Why didn't I suspect? Why didn't the avenging angel whisper the terrible truth in my ear?"

"It was not to be so."

"No. Justice seldom does anything till the red hand has vanished. Dead? By what means, Mr. Gideon?"

"A hand strangled him—broke his neck, in fact."

"Like this, do you mean?" and the old man threw out his hands to close them on air and to make a quick gesture as if they had a human throat in their grasp.

"The only witness did not witness the actual murder."

"Oho! there was a witness, then?"

"Yes; Iva, the housemaid, saw the man standing before his victim."

"The man I saw?"

"Her description and yours do not tally," said the detective. "She saw a tall man with a slim, peaked face."

"Not my man," replied old Cholly. "That wasn't the sort o' man I saw come out of Harlan Hope's house about six o'clock. Mine was heavier set, with dark eyes, which I saw in the lamplight; no slim face, no receding forehead. Such a face and head had Sammy Cerberus, but I haven't seen him since the night after the Virginian tragedy. What can I do? What must I do to help you avenge Harlan Hope's death?"

The old man seemed to be burning with eagerness.

"Wait. Your time may come, Cholly. I want your services in another way. Where do you live?"

"Here," smiled the other.

"But you sleep elsewhere. You have a real home."

"Yes, the only one I would accept at his hands. No 110 N—Street, up-stairs, the first door to the right."

"It's not hard to find."

"No."

"Watch the newspapers to-morrow and consult the 'Found' columns. Don't be startled at anything you may see."

"I won't, Mr. Gideon. I trust you. It is about the avenging of Harlan Hope's death?"

"That's the goal now, Cholly."

"Draw on me whenever I can cash the demand," grinned the old man, and then his face grew white again. "Dead! And he defended me the time Mother Trumps kept her mouth closed. He would have defended me with his life; but he could not make that woman unseal her lips and tell the truth. It will come out one of these days, for I have sworn to hunt her to the grave and to wrest from her there, if nowhere else, the truth. She must make reparation; but you want to know where she is. I will tell you."

Ten minutes later the figure of old Cholly might have been seen tottering through the park, and in a short time it vanished, followed by a pair of keen eyes in the head of a man who for some time had been watching the couple on the park bench.

Old Cholly did not look behind him.

He passed into the street whose stones he had pressed on many occasions, and turned into the narrow and dingy street where he lived.

The living ferret was at his heels.

Cholly passed into a house which gave forth evidences of great age, and disappeared among the shadows there.

Into a little room barely six by eight he went, shutting the door behind him.

As he turned toward the table over which hung the unlighted jet, he heard a step behind him, and in another instant he had turned with the agility of a leopard.

"Who is it?" asked Cholly.

There was no reply.

"Is it you, Mr. Gideon?"

Out of the gloom came a footstep and the old man, straightening at the table, doubled his fists as he drew back for defense.

"Strike a light!" said a commanding voice.

Without another word it was done, and as the jet flared up the old man found

himself face to face with a strange-looking being.

The man who stood before old Cholly might have been fifty-five; he was well dressed, but there rested on his face a haggard look which seemed to have been there a long time.

His face was covered with a darkish beard, well set, but not very old, and his hat, slouched and torn at the rim, but poorly covered his head.

For half a second these two men stood face to face with one end of the table between them, and then old Cholly uttered a cry.

"In God's name, when did the sea give you up, Jonas South?"

"When?" the other laughed. "Let me ask when the forest let you out to light and freedom?"

Old Cholly burst into a singular laugh, which echoed strangely in that little room.

"Shall it be peace?" asked the stranger, holding out his hand.

Cholly did not hesitate, but seized the hand and pressed it.

"Peace it shall be, though years ago it was war between us. I need you now. I am in trouble. I have lost my best friend. I have lost the man who stood up for me when the law held me in its grip, tightened by Mother Trumps' perjury."

"Ho! you know something against that woman, do you? What have you to say about my wife?"

"Your wife?"

"Yes. I married her years ago, but let her slip through my fingers—glad to get rid of the vixen. She turned on you, did she?"

"Tried to swear me into stripes," bitterly answered Cholly. "But Jonas, he's dead."

"Who's dead?"

"Eric—Harlan Hope, as they called him in New York."

"Dead? Why, Cholly, don't you know that he was accused of killing the servant, and vengeance some day overtakes the evildoer."

"Don't intimate that his hands were stained with the old man's blood! Don't tell me that Harlan Hope did the deed. You forget Dandy Finch; you forget the girl, the pretty, imperious Lotta, who came between those two men."

"I forget nothing—couldn't if I wanted to. Forget Lotta? I would forget my mother first. Did she afterward marry Eric?"

"You would say so if you could see Harlan Hope's only child. She is the very picture of Lotta as she was in Virginia. She is dead, now, and this crime is unknown to her."

"Oh, it's a crime, then?"

"Murder, Jonas. And we two may help the ferrets ferret out the red hand. Don't tell me your story now. I will hear it some other time. You saw us in the park?"

"I did. I saw you talking to the man on the bench with you. I knew you by the way you crossed your legs. That's why I'm here."

Cholly went to the door and looked down the narrow hall which ran toward the head of the staircase.

"Jonas," said he, coming back and lowering his voice, "I half believe I saw Dandy Finch to-night."

The other laughed.

"You see Dandy Finch? Why, don't you know that he died in Louisiana in a duel?"

"It was true, then? I heard that years ago, but there have been escapes and lies ever since the days of Adam."

A curious look came into Jonas South's eyes, and he averted his gaze an instant.

The sharp optics of old Cholly saw it.

"So it was false, then?" he cried.

"I didn't say it was."

"But your look—that betrays you."

"I did not intimate anything by my look, old boy. Your eyes cheat you."

With hands suddenly clinched, Cholly came around the table, the look of a lion in the depths of his eyes.

"You must tell me the truth. You

know it!" he cried. "You know whether he died in the duel or not."

Jonas South was pounced upon before he could lift a hand, and in a moment he had been thrust against a table, the power of old Cholly being exerted to its utmost to hold him there.

"What's the matter? Are you mad?" gasped Jonas.

"I've had trouble enough to make me mad—mad as a March hare," was the answer. "You've been a trickster all your life. You've played fast and loose for forty years. You've been the friend of Dandy Finch and the pretended ally of Harlan Hope. The night the old servant was strangled in his little den you were seen crouching in the arbor waiting—for whom? Will you tell me now, Jonas South? And, then, why are you here just at this time? Why haven't you turned up before? I ought to hand you over to the police. I will, as sure as there's a God in Heaven unless you tell the truth!"

The grip of Cholly's bony hands did not relax, and Jonas South felt the long fingers in his throat.

Suddenly the table moved.

The two men's weight pushed it toward the wall, and all at once they fell to the floor in a struggle for the mastery.

There their faces touched while their breath came hot and fetid from their lungs, and hand met hand in the tussle for power.

They were almost evenly matched, and all signs of old age seemed to have left old Cholly's limbs.

On the other hand, Jonas South struggled as perhaps he had not done in all his life, realizing that this battle meant victory or death.

They upset the rickety table.

They overturned the only chair in the miserable chamber, and rolled against the wall in the deadly wrestle.

Now the hands of Jonas South had old Cholly in their grip, and now the old park shadow twisted out of it, and caught him by the beard, nearly tearing it out by the roots.

Scarcely a word spoke the men on the floor as they rolled hither and thither in their struggle.

Their few ejaculations were oaths or hissed words of determination.

At last the hands of Jonas South got a firm grip, and one which the vanishing strength of his antagonist could not shake off.

The eyes of old Cholly rolled crazily in their sockets, his face turned dark, and his hands fell listless at his sides.

Jonas South arose and looked at his work.

"He was as strong as a lion. I wouldn't have thought it," said he. "Why, if I hadn't had all my muscle with me he would have won. But I was favored. So this is the old Perley of other days. Wanted me to tell what I knew. But not now, Perley. Some other time," and he laughed sarcastically.

Old Cholly lay still.

Jonas South turned and searched the rickety place.

His hands went everywhere; they dived into dark recesses, felt underneath the scant bedding, pried into the darkness of the little cupboard in one corner of the room, but found nothing.

"That man I saw him with in the park was a detective, and he wanted to hand me over to the police!" he exclaimed, turning and looking at the silent figure on the floor. "I guess he won't do that now. It's a water haul; no, not that, for what he knows or might have discovered will remain untold."

Jonas South bent over the motionless figure under the jet and lifted a hand, but it fell from his grasp with a strange thud.

"It's my secret, and shall ever be mine," said he. "It's my fortune. Harlan Hope dead! Perley Prince dead! I reap the benefit. From this night on I will roll in clover!"

He looked once more at his victim, threw wide the door and passed out into the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FLIGHT OF A BIRD.

It was after the burial of Harlan Hope. The newspapers had told in more than one column all that was known about the tragedy, and the reporters, Macawber-like, were waiting for something more to turn up to inspire their pens.

It was the day after the burial, and the shadows of night were stealing over the city.

Ruby Hope occupied the darkened parlor of the old mansion, and was alone.

Once or twice she thought she heard a脚步声 on the stairs, but, concluding that her ears had deceived her, she did not investigate.

When it came time to retire she arose and passed from the room, going into the library to see that all was right there.

Iva had not come down from her room, and Ruby went up-stairs.

She rapped lightly at Iva's door, but there was no response.

In another moment she opened the door and looked into the maid's bedroom.

It was not tenanted.

Then the lawyer's daughter recalled the noises on the stairs, and, wondering if the maid had gone out, she entered the room.

On the dresser lay a neatly folded note, which she picked up with some misgivings.

Iva had left the gas burning, and Ruby, the note in her hands, read as follows:

"Miss Ruby: Forgive me, but I must go. I shall vanish to-night beyond the ken of mortal man. I am driven away by the possession of a dreadful secret, and you will forgive me if I tell you that my story of the scene enacted in your father's room was a tissue of falsehoods. I dared not tell you anything else. I saw no tall man with a peaked face. I did not see that which I have described; but what I did see will never pass these lips of mine. Forgive me, I implore, and pray for the foolish girl who must fly under a dark and terrible shadow. I have seen you for the last time unless we should meet—No; let me not think of that. Farewell! You need not attempt to find me, for that is impossible. I vanish like a vapor, or like a shadow on the desert. Your friend as of old,

"IVY GUANT."

No wonder the half-bewildered girl read and re-read that startling note.

Every word seemed to burn itself into her brain.

Iva gone? Her story false? The detective put on the wrong scent?

Was all this true?

Might not this note be as false as the tale she had told her and Amos Shartle?

Ruby began to search the maid's room and found that she had taken away some things she would be apt to need in her flight.

She must have slipped from the house when she (Ruby) heard the noises on the staircase.

This was confirmed by the brightness of the ink on the paper, for she could see that the note had been recently written and the ink still glistened on the pen, which she had laid away.

So Iva held the dread secret after all.

So the tall man with the peaked face, the dark suit and the long hands was a myth.

Her father had not been murdered by such a person, but by another man whom Iva knew.

All this went like arrows of pain and suspense into Ruby Hope's heart.

What was to be done?

She thought first of Amos Shartle, but at that hour the office on Broadway would not be open, and she was not well enough acquainted with her father's partner to know where he spent his evenings.

And, then, the mystery of the recent murder might take him from his old haunts and render him very hard to find.

But she knew the detective's address.

Gideon Gale had told her how to reach him if she needed assistance, and she had remembered his instructions.

No use to look for Iva.

She had evidently carried out a part of her threat and at that moment might have been in the new hiding place, or mayhap at the bottom of the river.

Still Ruby thought that the detective should see the note.

She hid it in her dress and resolved to see Gotham Gid as soon as possible.

Courageous to a degree, the daughter of Harlan Hope hurriedly equipped herself for a little nocturnal jaunt, and quitted the house.

In the plain dark garb she assumed no one seemed to recognize her, and in a few minutes she was in the vicinity of the detective's lodgings.

What if she should find them empty?

But she was lucky to a degree, for the first knock was answered by a脚步声 beyond the door, and Gideon Gale opened it to see before him the very woman about whom he had just been thinking.

The detective was alone.

Ruby's face showed that an important mission had brought her out at that hour, and in a little time she laid the note before the man of clews.

She watched the detective with keen interest as he mastered Iva's writing and when he looked up a question was on her tongue.

"What do you think, Mr. Gale?"

For a moment the detective did not speak, and his face was as immobile as that of the Sphinx.

He read the note again and once more looked into her face.

"You have never mistrusted Iva?" said he.

"Never."

"You have always found her faithful to you?"

"Ever so, and I believed implicitly the story she told Mr. Shartle and myself."

"About the tall man with the peaked face? Yes. It was a plausible story, but shan't ever retell it to me."

"That is true," said Ruby, with a smile. "But, really, I did not attach much importance to that, for the girl seemed to be almost nerveless, and I attributed her failure to that."

"Perhaps you did right. Mr. Shartle told me that she was very nervous, or seemed to be. But after all she seemed to have been playing a game."

"That note is such confession," remarked Ruby, her eyes falling to the letter in the ferret's hand. "To think that Iva would play a game like that! It absolutely startles me!"

"What do you know of her relatives?" asked the detective.

"Nothing. She once told me that she was an orphan, and that she was early thrown upon her own resources, and of course we believed her. She never appeared to have any acquaintances."

"Nor got any mail?"

"I cannot answer that question, for she generally met the postman at the door, took the mail for the house and brought it to father or myself, as it happened."

"Is this her own writing?"

"Certainly. I have seen it often, for now and then she would leave notes for me when she slipped out for a little shopping."

Gotham Gid folded the note and threw it on the table.

In another moment he took from his pocket a bit of newspaper, which he handed over to Ruby.

It was an advertisement, and the girl read as follows

"Found—A shark tooth, with gold settings and date '1869' on the metal. Finder can have property by calling at 110 N—Street, up-stairs, first door to right."

Miss Hope looked up and caught the detective's eye.

"It is the tooth Mr. Shartle found in the library?" said she.

"The same, miss."

"Is the number given in this advertisement Mr. Shartle's address?"

A faint smile came to Gotham Gid's face.

"No," said he. "Were you to go to 110

and ask for the holder of the tooth you would not see Mr. Shartle. Up to an hour ago the owner of the charm had not called for his property."

"And he never may," cried Ruby Hope. "If the man suspects that a trap has been set for him he will never come, but will let the tooth remain missing."

"You may be right, miss. Time will tell. Will you let me keep Miss Guant's note?"

"Keep it. I intended from the first to turn it over to you. You may have trouble in finding her."

"Doubtless."

"She is secretive and at times as dumb as one can be."

"Good qualities in any one who has a secret," smiled the ferret. "We will see about Miss Guant. She may not be as well hidden as she intimates."

Ruby arose to go, seeing that she could say no more, but as she turned toward the door a footstep was heard in the hall, and the detective looked across the room.

"Don't go," he said, to his fair visitor, and Ruby turned her face from the door, which the detective was about to open.

The following moment there came into the room a man of forty, whose face was covered with a reddish beard.

He looked from the ferret to the girl, and at last fixed his gaze upon her.

"May I speak to her?" he said, advancing, but as Ruby's eyes met his he fell back with a strange quiver of muscle.

"Speak if you wish," said Gideon Gale. "This is Miss Hope."

"I know it," grinned the stranger. "She doesn't know me, however."

"I do not," replied Ruby, who was watching the man with all the curiosity of her nature.

"Looks like her father, eh?" and the speaker turned to the ferret.

"Perhaps. Are you through with her?"

"Yes. I guess so. Kind o' startled me to run ag'in' her here. Wasn't looking for anything of the sort. But shall she remain?"

"Do you wish her to stay?"

"I can't see how it would do any harm. Haven't much to say, but what it is may be important."

The man leaned against the table so that his face was turned toward the lawyer's daughter, whom he watched all the time.

"You see, I thought I would come as soon as possible," he said, addressing the detective. "I've been at work and this is what I've discovered: In the first place, Jonas South never was lost at sea, but has been living in this city for at least six months."

"Jonas South!" cried Ruby, with a strange start. "I know something about that name. It cannot be connected with the crime, Mr. Gale."

"I don't deny that you may have heard of it," replied the stranger. "Jonas South used to be an acquaintance of your father's, but up till a short time ago it was believed that he was drowned. It was all fudge, however, for he is the liveliest corpse you ever saw. He's haunted the Battery for months, and very little escaped his eye. I can lay my hand on him to-night. I know where he is, and, what is more, I want you to see him at work."

"At work?" echoed the detective.

"Exactly. I dare say no other man in all this city, big as it is, is engaged in the same business. You'll say so when you see Jonas South."

"We'll take a look at him."

"But tell me," cried Ruby, who was eager to speak, "tell me if this man, Jonas South, can be connected with the murderer?"

The man with the red beard seemed to smile.

"That is the man to answer all such questions," he answered, nodding to Gotham Gid. "We've been in partnership for some time, but I defer always to him, miss."

"I will try and answer your query some other time," mildly said the ferret, looking at Ruby. "Meantime, if you will let me accompany Mr. Terrier here, I will have some news for you by morning."

"Mr. Terrier!" laughed the red-bearded man, with a light guffaw. "That's not my name, miss. I play terrier for Gideon Gale. Ask him if I ever made a bad break."

Gideon shook his head, and said:

"Never, Peter," and while the last word lingered, Ruby Hope left the two men to themselves.

CHAPTER IX.

A HIDDEN HAND COMES TO LIGHT.

It must not be supposed that during the time which intervened between Gideon Gale's visit to the quarters once occupied by Mother Trumps and the burial of Harlan Hope, the detective had been idle.

Some of the antecedents of the murdered lawyer he had obtained, as we have seen, from the old man called "Cholly," though, in reality, his name was Perley Prince.

The story of the old Virginian crime—the murder of the old plantation servant—had thus been brought out.

It had also been stated by Cholly that Harlan Hope had a brother, who years before had wandered away and was supposed to have died in some foreign land.

The detective had been permitted to look into the private papers left behind by the murdered lawyer, and one or two letters, or rather fragments of such, had interested him.

While they did not furnish a very strong link in the chain which he was making, they let some light upon a subject which he had already begun to suspect.

It thus became evident to the keen-nosed ferret that Harlan Hope had at one time been blackmailed, and by some one who must have known of the plantation tragedy.

The fragments of letters found among the lawyer's private papers told him this; but who had made money out of the secret?

The theft of the packet which Ruby had carried to Amos Shartle the afternoon before the murder was an important thing in the drama of mystery, but the detective believed, from what Amos had said about the thief that Crowley Creepers was the man with the cold hand.

His visit to Mother Trumps' place had given him an idea who inhabited it, and the face which he saw at the end of the hallway convinced him that Creepers was not far away.

About the time of the visit of the Terrier to Gideon's room, while he was having his interview with Ruby concerning Iva's strange and startling letter, a handsome man might have been seen reclining on a sofa in a fashionable part of New York.

"What's the use of waiting any longer?" said a woman who stood near him—a woman with dark eyes that seemed to swim in a brilliant light. "Here we've been waiting more than a year, and now that he's dead, why don't you put in the claim?"

The man looked up at her and smiled.

"Wait two or three days more," said he.

"Why not strike to-morrow? Don't you know that the ferrets are at work? They won't leave a stone unturned; they will look into every dark spot for the trail. I don't care who killed him, saying that he was really killed—I don't care, I say, who did the deed; it was well done."

There was no reply, the occupant of the sofa looking away for a moment, only to bring his gaze back to her.

"If they succeed it will be too late for us," she went on.

"That's right, Vera."

"If they find the hand that killed Harlan Hope, why we can't expect to make a ten strike?"

"But they can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because the blow was delivered without a witness."

"You've read the newspapers?"

"All of them."

"And you've read the theories of the reporters?"

"What do they amount to? Don't you

know, woman, that it is all speculation?"

"I know a good deal of it is. You must remember that sometimes these very men give the best of detectives pointers."

"Occasionally."

"This is the last and best account which I have seen. Perhaps you've seen it."

As she spoke she handed him a slip of newspaper, which she took from her pocket.

He glanced at it, and a broad smile overspread his face.

"You took that all in, did you?" he asked.

"It's very well written—almost as good as if the murderer told the story himself."

"Exactly. It struck you, I see, and if you were a detective you would be thrown off on that same trail, after reading that article."

Vera blushed, but did not reply immediately.

"Don't you know that that article was penned for a certain purpose?"

She shook her head.

"It had a mission to perform, and I believe it has done its duty to a demonstration."

"You do?"

"Yes, Vera. I wrote that article."

She fell back a pace, and looked at him, astonished.

For a moment she changed color, and then her cheeks remained set in crimson.

"It was pretty bold, I think," said she.

"I don't agree with you. It was simply a piece of impudence, that's all."

"But what if they trace the authorship of the article?"

"Ho, that's easy. I sent in my name with the communication."

"Are you mad, man?"

He laughed outright.

"Have I shown any symptoms of insanity?" he asked.

"You have not, unless—"

"That is a starter, eh? Look here, woman, these man-catchers read everything. They have read that ere this. It is an out-of-the-way suggestion. Not one of them thought of the ideas I have advanced. For instance, where I suggest that perhaps Harlan Hope had an enemy who professed to be a friend, and who may have had access to the house at all hours—"

"Had he such an acquaintance?" eagerly asked the black-eyed woman.

"I can't say, but look at the novel suggestion. Now, the ferrets will turn about and look for a person of that sort, and there's no telling where they will stop."

"Why, they might suspect his partner?"

"Amos Shartle—the sleek, cunning Amos, who was fast becoming Harlan Hope's equal at the bar? There's no doubt that the door of the Hope house was open to him at all times, and if he cared to, why—"

"It's the coolest piece of business I ever heard of," interrupted Vera, her eyes suddenly flashing. "I see the devilish ingenuity of your article."

"I thought you'd see it presently."

"They might arrest Amos Shartle?"

"Just so."

"And if he could not prove an alibi—"

"He'd very much be in the toils, eh?"

"Why, he'd hang!" exclaimed Vera.

"Like many a man has done before him."

"But, of course, Amos Shartle can prove where he was that night."

"Can he?"

"He must, if the ferrets take your suggestions in earnest and come down upon him."

"Just so; but do you suppose, woman, that I wrote that article without seeing into the future?"

"I think not; but Amos Shartle certainly wasn't at the Hope house that night."

"He will have to prove where he was, or that he couldn't have been there."

"Well, you beat Satan," cried the woman, her eyes flashing as she regarded the man on the sofa.

"Thanks. Now, do you want me to put in my claim right off, or are you willing

to give me a little time—say four days; that will be long enough, I think—to make every stroke tell."

"Take the time," said Vera.

She moved across the room and began to rearrange her collar in the oval mirror that hung there.

All at once she turned and came towards the man, with face aflame and her hand raised.

"The door opened yonder!" she cried, pointing at a door opposite the mirror.

"Impossible!"

The one on the sofa sat bolt upright, and his face had lost color.

"But I saw it, and besides that, a glimpse of a face."

"There can't be a spy in this house."

"But I saw the face—saw it reflected in the mirror. It was not a false vision, no bit of imagination."

He sprang to the door, caught the knob and jerked it open, revealing a well-appointed room, which appeared to be entirely empty.

"You see," said he, turning with a triumphant smile upon the breathless woman. "You see, madam, that you are at fault."

Vera stood on the threshold, to which she had advanced, with her gaze fixed on the tenantless chamber, and her bosom motionless, as if her breath had left it.

"I know what I saw," she persisted. "It was a face at the door, and the door opened."

"What sort of face was it?"

"I cannot tell that. I saw so little of it that I cannot give you any description."

He turned on the gas in the suspected chamber, which he surveyed from the middle of it.

"A spy couldn't live a minute in this house without being discovered," he went on. "In walking across this room he would touch the carpet in a spot where he would communicate with a wire that sends a signal of human presence into every other room in this house. I am prepared for all emergencies."

Vera made no reply.

"Let's go back. Rest assured that no spy was here to-night."

"I cannot. I saw the door open—I don't care if the carpet hides a thousand tell-tale wires—I saw a face at that door, and I tell you, Gervals Nightshade, that you must watch."

He laughed at her, and they returned to the parlor.

"You are going out?" said he, looking at her.

"Yes."

"Will you see Sam?"

"I think not. I shall not hunt him up, at any rate."

"Very well. You would not be likely to find him if you did."

"I have other business—of my own, for even I have a right to transact a little in that direction."

"Yes. If you take that newspaper cutting with you, be careful who sees it," he went on. "If it turns the ferrets toward Mr. Amos Shartle it will be a grand joke, and let me tell you, woman, that he dare not detail all his whereabouts that afternoon and night."

Vera gave him a strong look, and walked across the room, her heels giving forth no sound in the soft carpet.

"Don't bank too much on that theory winning the game for us," said she. "Amos Shartle is a lawyer, and will know how to fight it. The other theory you hint at is the best, to my notion—the sending of some one to Virginia, where, you say in the article, Harlan Hope formerly lived, and looking up his youth. There is where 'the old enemy' might come in; and while that theory would save Amos Shartle, it would puzzle the detectives. Keep them puzzled till you are fully prepared to strike, which cannot be—"

"Not until I hold in my hands the papers which I am sure Harlan Hope had in his possession."

"I thought you already had them."

"I have not, but they are in one of two places—in the house where he lived or in

the hands or safe keeping of Amos Shartle."

"Can't you strike without them?"

She came over to where he had seated himself in the large armchair at the table, and, bending forward, said in lowered voice:

"I am astonished. I thought you had secured those documents. I have believed that you had the prize in your possession. Why, man, where do you think it is? Those papers prove, as you know, the birth of the brother; they tell the full story of Harlan Hope's past, and without them we can't play out our hand."

"Go and make your visit. Leave the rest to me. I am now on the trail of the secret. I will have those papers in my hands before to-morrow night. Then stand off and see the most brilliant play in Major Nightshade's life."

He waved her a kiss, and, with a look at him, she left him alone.

CHAPTER X.

THE VAILED FACE.

The man called the Terrier was eager to conduct the city ferret to the spot where Jonas South was expected to be found.

Gideon Gale was just as eager to see the man at work, and after Ruby Hope's departure from his lodgings the two started.

The Terrier led the ferret half way across the city, and at last clutched his arm and dodged with him down a narrow and poorly-lighted street.

"I left him not an hour ago," said he. "This man who came back from the sea, as it were—who escaped death beneath the waves—is engaged in the queerest sort of business."

"What is it, Peter?"

"Wait and see. Here we are."

They halted in front of a house not very well-to-do, but for all that pretty well cared for, though out of style, and the Terrier conducted the detective to a back yard, from which they could see a light, which seemed to sift through a drawn blind.

The two ferrets crossed this yard and approached the window, where they stopped and listened.

"He's at home," whispered the Terrier. "We shall now see Jonas South, the man who has injected himself into this game of mystery, and, as you know, the person who followed old Cholly to his house and left him for dead on the floor."

The window was found to be so fastened and the blind so well drawn that for some time they could not see into the room beyond.

"Wait," said the Terrier, inserting a knife blade between two of the shutter slats, and in a jiffy he had made a hole which invited an eye.

"Look," said he to Gideon Gale.

The detective put his eager optic to the opening, and for a little while saw nothing.

The Terrier watched him with a great deal of curiosity.

"What do you see?" he asked, at last.

The detective made no reply, but continued to look.

By degrees the interior of the room before him came into view, and he looked on.

It was not a large place, and he found it occupied by a single occupant.

This person was a well-built man, who sat at a bench, upon which fell the light of a jet overhead.

He had a shade over his eyes, and his figure was bent over the bench.

Before him lay a lot of grotesque things looking very much like frogs, and some were posed in odd positions, with miniature fiddles in their hands.

Others paraded at one end of the bench, like a lot of soldiers, carrying little guns, and a drum-major in green and gold seemed to swing his baton like an old hand.

"A toy-maker," said the detective, barely above his breath.

"But such toys!" cried the Terrier. "That man skins frogs and transforms

them into soldiers and violinists. Such a queer business! None other like it in the city."

Gideon Gale watched the taxidermist a few moments longer, when he saw him rise from the bench and cast his eye-shade upon it.

Then he saw the cruel face, the dark eyes and the long, prehensile hands.

"He's dangerous, is Jonas South," whispered a voice at his ear.

"Perhaps—to those who fear him."

"But look at his hands! No wonder they nearly killed old Cholly."

"They're like the claws of an ape, and seem to have the strength of one."

"Exactly. I've felt them."

"You?"

"You forget, Gideon, that years ago I lived in Virginia, and that those hands were there then."

"Yes."

"They can kill with the certainty of a bomb. All he has to do is to exert his strength with those hands at his victim's throat, and, presto! his victim steps out of existence."

Meantime Jonas South was making a new toilet.

He changed his work garments, after which he swept a dozen of his grotesque puppets into a basket, which he set on the bench preparatory to going away.

"Shall we follow" asked the Terrier.

"No. He's merely going out to market his odd-looking wares. We will remain."

Jonas South picked up the basket and left the room, carefully locking the door behind him, as the watchers could tell by the clicking of the lock.

They waited a while.

"You want to search the room, don't you?" asked the Terrier.

"Yes."

The ingenuity of the detective's spy opened the way, and in a little time Gideon Gale stood in the chamber recently deserted by the taxidermist.

The light, which Jonas South had turned low, enabled him to see all the place contained, and, while the Terrier stood guard outside, he made the best of his time.

The detective passed over to the work-bench and surveyed it a moment.

He saw how skillful were the hands of Jonas South, and how neat he made his wares appear.

But he had not entered the house to inspect a lot of half-mounted frogs.

He looked into every unlocked place, but took good care not to disturb anything.

All at once, as he opened a little cupboard in the wall, he fell back with an ejaculation, and stood spellbound, as it were, in the middle of the room.

The light fell into the cupboard, and the ferret of New York saw on one of the shelves a lot of frogs holding out in their hands a lot of miniature guns.

The opening of the cupboard seemed to have started the group, and in another instant the little guns were popping away, sending tiny pellets all around the detective.

In another moment, however, the ferret was laughing at the scene, but suddenly he heard a strange cry.

The door which they had heard locked opened, and there stood on the threshold a veiled woman.

Her figure was tall and queenly in proportions.

She was well dressed, and stood on the step with a stateliness that astonished the detective.

For a moment she looked at Gideon Gale, and then she advanced into the room.

"What is wanting?" she demanded, in a haughty tone.

"I am waiting for Jonas."

"Waiting for Jonas, are you? Then why are you looking into every nook of this room?"

"Curiosity, madam," replied the ferret, with a slight smile.

"Impudence!" flashed the veiled one. "It seems to me that instead of waiting for Jonas, you have merely taken advantage of his absence to play the role of spy."

What could Gideon say to this?

The figure before him seemed to increase in stature and he watched the hands that opened and shut spasmodically at her isdes.

"You are a police spy. Confess it!" cried she.

"Do you think so?"

"I know it. You are one of the sleuth-hounds of this city, and your mission here is in the interest of meddling."

"But you are the true visitor. You have come to see Jonas—perhaps to patronize his frog counter."

A faint laugh seemed to move the vail, but at the same time a hand shot out till it covered the detective.

It was a gloved hand.

"Spy, you enter a trap of death," cried she. "You should know that Jonas South has friends who stand by him through thick and thin. You have invaded his place without invitation—"

"But you are here by his wishes?"

"Never mind. I can spot you. I can tell him that the police of New York are looking after him, and there would be an end to your work."

Before the detective could reply there came across the floor from the window by which he had entered the house, a quick, bounding step.

The veiled one uttered a cry, and fell back a pace, but near the wall she stopped and looked at the intruder.

It was Peter, the Terrier.

Face to face for a moment stood the man and the woman, and the detective's friend threw out both hands as if he would tear the vail away.

"Not by your hand," cried the woman, and from the folds of her garments in the twinkling of an eye leaped a revolver, whose barrel flashed in the light as it was lifted.

"It is a game for two!" said Peter, and he leaped toward her, struck down the weapon, and pinioned her against the wall.

The spy was in his element and he held his prisoner against the plastering, despite her efforts to escape and use the deadly weapon.

"Do you care to see her face?" asked Peter, looking over his shoulder at Gideon Gale.

"Never mind. Let her go."

"Without lifting the vail? I wouldn't mind seeing her face myself, and, indeed, my fingers itch to tear the vail off."

"Don't!" answered the detective, and the right hand of the Terrier dropped at his side.

The woman seemed to breathe freer.

"I could guess at your identity and not miss the mark very far," continued Peter.

There was no reply.

"Don't you want me to go back a few years into the past? Don't you want to hear about the incidents of your early life?"

There was a taunting laugh beneath the vail.

"You don't know anything," said she.

"Hear her?" cried Peter, the Terrier, looking again at the detective.

In another moment the woman, summoning all her strength, broke from the Terrier's grasp and clutched the door-knob, while she looked over her shoulder at the discomfited man.

Peter seemed to be bracing for a spring at his escaping prisoner, when the hand of Gideon Gale pulled him back.

"Let her go," said the detective.

"It'll be a sorry day for both of us, mind that," was the reply.

"Take the risk, Peter," and the ferret dropped his voice. "You can keep her in sight, you know."

The veiled unknown had opened the door and was still looking at the two men with eyes that must have emitted sparks of fire beneath the folds of the vail.

"Your watchdog is right, detective," said she. "My escape dooms you both."

With this she pulled the door wide and sprang through it, vanishing so quickly that the ferret of the metropolis could hardly comprehend that she was gone.

"You see," said Peter, the Terrier, as she fled, "it was a great mistake. I had

her in my hands and could have lifted that vail."

"Well, whose face would you have seen, Peter?"

"I have an idea whose. It is a face fair to look upon, but dangerous in its wild beauty. That woman has a hand like a cake of ice. It never had a drop of blood in it. The whole family were thus. I knew them all."

"But you haven't named her."

The Terrier crossed over to where the detective stood and leaned toward him as one of his hands dropped lightly upon his arm.

"Who was she? Once she was Korah, but now they call her Vera. What brought her thither? Ah, she knows much about Jonas South. Why, I would sooner be hunted by a pack of wolves on a lonely moor than be tracked by her. Dangerous? You heard what she said, Gideon? Both of us are doomed! Why? We have crossed the path of Vera the Vailed. We have taken up a trail in which she is interested, for out of this mystery we get victory or death. Come! Let us go back. You have seen Jonas South at work. You have stood face to face with Vera; but not for the last time for a million!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE GRAYBEARD BURGLAR.

Amos Shartle was still looking for the man with the cold hand, but with few real hopes of success.

At times he would feel the thrill of that bloodless member and in the dead hours of night he would suddenly find himself wide awake in bed with a coldness at his wrist and a ghastly sweat oozing from the pores of his forehead.

On the night of the events we have just narrated—the meeting of Gideon Gale with the veiled woman in Jonas South's quarters—Amos Shartle found himself on the street after twelve, and not far from his office.

He was not in the habit of going to the place at that hour, but having come from a little gathering of friends, to whom he had confided the story of the strange theft, he resolved to visit the office to see if all was safe there.

Beside this desire, Amos had another object in view, for he had conceived the idea that the robber might return for another invasion and he might be fortunate enough to catch him at work.

Therefore Amos Shartle, looking a trifle older for the startling scenes through which he had passed in the last few days, mounted the steps and made his way down the hall toward the office.

Midway down the corridor, full of shadows at the time and as silent as the grave, he stopped and fell against the wall.

The night globe in the hall showed him one thing.

His office door stood ajar.

Amos Shartle watched that door with his heart in his throat, hardly knowing what to do—whether to slip down and rouse the nearest policeman, or whether to wait till the burglar came out, when he could try conclusions with him.

A man brave as a lion at times will feel come over him a chill of dread, and while it was thus with Amos, notwithstanding his feelings, he crept down the corridor toward the door.

Pistol in hand, he approached the place, and at last ventured to look into the office.

There was a light there, as if the intruder had turned on the gas for the purpose of letting him see just what he was doing.

At first Amos saw nothing, and then he noticed something on the floor near the table.

Not only this, but the mat which hid the secret door had been turned back.

All this the young lawyer could see.

Amos continued to watch the crumpled figure on the floor, expecting at any minute to see it rise and expose itself.

Seconds were minutes to the man at the half-open door.

Evidently the man in the office was disappointed, for he rose with a singular cry.

"Not here!" he exclaimed. "In the name of Heaven, what's become of it?"

Amos might have answered the question, but he did not, only remained in the corridor, looking with distended eyes at the unknown speaker.

He saw that he was a man with an iron-gray beard, not at all like him with the icy hand.

He shut the trap with his foot, and then kicked the mat back to its place.

"Could he have put it elsewhere?" he said, aloud, as he turned to another part of the office. Amos followed him with his eyes and saw him stoop before the safe at another side of the room.

In a little while the steel door swung back, and with difficulty Shartle suppressed a cry which might have betrayed him.

He saw the unknown reach in and pull out several packages; he saw the gloved hands of the eager hunter sort out several drawers and shake his head.

"Not here. Where is it?" and the night marauder stood before the safe and looked at it with eyes that seemed to emit sparks of revenge.

"I could tell him where it went if he's looking for the sealed packet," thought Amos Shartle. "But I won't. I want to see more of this man."

The prowler went through the office with the air of one who seemed to know just where he was looking.

His fingers were deft and swift, and at last as he replaced the last disturbed article as he had found it, he turned to the door.

Then it was that Amos Shartle drew back with some precipitation.

Not for the world would he have been seen by that man.

He held his breath as the footsteps of the intruder came toward the hall, and from his hiding place in another door Amos saw him actually lock the office.

"A duplicate key!" thought Amos. "The only one outside of my pockets is in Harlan Hope's desk. This man came here prepared. He knows what he's doing."

With a look at the door, upon which was fastened the still unchanged sign of "Hope & Shartle," he walked leisurely down the corridor to the head of the staircase.

Once he glanced at the elevator, which had ceased to work for the night, and stopped at the first step.

Shartle waited till he vanished, when he sprang to the head of the flight and looked down.

He saw the vanishing figure of the burglar, and watched it till it reached the lower landing.

Then he pushed after it.

It was a successful chase to the street below, and Amos stood in the night air congratulating himself that he still saw the man whose identity he intended to establish.

He was not hard to keep in sight, for he walked away without any apparent attempt to shut off pursuit.

Amos followed.

"I'll know if I have to track him over into Jersey," said he to himself. "That man, whoever he is, knew that the packet once reposed in the iron box beneath the office floor, and he came to see what had become of it."

A long trail was it for Amos, unused to tracking his fellow-men.

He was led to a street not far from the Bowery, and leading into it.

"At last!" remarked the lawyer, as his man stopped and inserted a key into a door.

"He lives there, and I know where to look for him, or to send Gideon Gale. But I'd like to see more of him. I don't like to go back without knowing who he is or something about him. I won't sleep if I do, and, not knowing much about him, it might be a little risky searching the house for him."

By this time the unknown had vanished beyond the steps, and Amos still debated what to do.

"Shall I or shall I not?" He had just seen a light in one of the upper front win-

dows. "I could find the room if I could only get inside, but, hang it all, there's no telling what sort of human tiger he is."

Amos Shartle lost time while he debated what to do.

If he had had Gideon Gale with him there would have been no hesitancy.

He knew the detective and felt that, with Gotham Gid at his right hand, the identity of the office invader would not remain long a mystery.

All at once the light in the upper room vanished.

"In bed!" ejaculated Amos.

He crossed the street.

He walked back and forth before the house, taking notice of its general appearance and the closed windows.

There was very little that escaped him.

He was coming back past the place for the tenth time, when the door suddenly opened.

Amos was directly in front of the door, and the noise startled him.

He saw the stranger once more.

Amos felt a thrill seize upon his nerves, but he stood his ground.

He was face to face with the night prowler, but the light was not very strong and did not afford him a good view of the bearded face.

"Why not accuse him?" flashed through Amos Shartle's mind.

He sprang toward the man on the steps.

It was a very bold thing for him to do, and if he had reflected perhaps he would not have taken the chances.

"Good-night," said Amos.

The other stood his ground, but leaned a little forward, and seemed to pierce the lawyer with his gaze.

"You will pardon me, but I must say a word. You didn't find what you were looking for a while ago."

"What's that, my friend?" was the reply, in a rasping voice, quite unlike any Amos had ever heard. "I didn't find what I was looking for, eh? That's a funny accusation."

"It's all right, of course, but it's very pertinent. You have been playing burglar."

"I, sir?"

"Nobody else. Come! I've tracked you from the scene of your work and there can't be a mistake. You didn't find it under the office mat?"

For half a second it seemed as if the stranger would throw himself against Amos Shartle, who had become uncommonly cool, surprising himself in this particular, but as suddenly as he had leaned forward, he drew off and straightened.

"What! I a burglar, and in your office?" he exclaimed. "Pray, explain."

"In a word: You were in the office of Hope & Shartle, lawyers, on Broadway. You entered with a duplicate key; you turned up a mat on the floor, and then found a trap door which is there."

"Who saw me do this?"

"I did, sir."

"And, pray, where were you at the time?"

"At the door. And, failing to find what you looked for in the treasure box, you searched the room, even opening the safe."

"You are very precise in your accusations."

"I have eyes, sir."

"What could I have been looking for in that office?"

Amos hesitated.

It appeared to him that the eyes above him got a sharp, unearthly glitter, and there seemed to come to the face, or what was exposed where there was no beard, a pallor which actually frightened him, man that he was.

"You haven't answered me," said the unknown. "You haven't informed me what, if anything, of value the hole in the office must have secreted."

"You must have known, sir, else why would you have gone to the place?"

"Did I carry away anything that you saw?"

"Nothing."

"Then the place in the floor was empty?"

"There was nothing in it. I could have told you that."

"You?"

"Yes. I am Amos Shartle."

"Oho!" cried the other, and the gray eyes glittered. "So you are Mr. Shartle? Perhaps you will tell me what became of the object which you accuse me of looking for?"

"I don't see as I am obliged to tell you," was the reply.

"Ah! You don't dare to tell the truth—to expose your own duplicity."

"Have a care, sir!" cried Amos. "You mistake your man. Don't impugn my honor or seek to tarnish my name."

"Then why not tell me what became of the contents of the iron box in the floor, since you are so sure that I entered the office of Hope & Shartle this very night looking for it?"

Amos thought he may have gone far enough with this man.

He held his peace.

"If I went thither, as you say, and found nothing, was it not on account of your baseness!" almost hissed the unknown.

That instant Amos Shartle raised his hand and caught at the iron gray beard before him.

His fingers met in the silvery hair; he jerked back as another hand was lifted to thwart him and the beard was pulled off.

"Merciful God!" cried the Broadway lawyer, as he recoiled, reeling down the steps in a maze. "Ghost, man or devil—which?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHARK TOOTH'S OWNER.

How Amos Shartle reached his lodgings he never knew.

When he came out of the swoon in which his landlady found him in the little chamber after sunrise the following day he talked incoherently, and his eyes had a wild, dazed look.

In short, the man was raving mad.

Opiates soothed him for a while, and those who watched beside his couch began to hope that he would be able to solve the mystery of his madness, but he passed again into a state of insensibility, and hope vanished.

Amos Shartle had received a shock of some kind, but no one could tell what had happened.

The doctors said he may have come suddenly face to face with some unknown terror, or he might have been struck with a weapon capable of producing insanity, but at the same time leaving no wound.

It was in the afternoon that Gideon Gale, the New York detective, came up the steps leading to the lawyer's chambers.

The ferret was ushered into the place, which was darkened, and the attendant arose and met him.

"How is he?" asked Gideon.

"No better. He has been asking after a person named Gale."

"I am Gideon Gale," said the detective, at which the face of the attendant brightened.

He approached the bed and bent over the wide-awake lawyer.

"Amos?"

At sound of the ferret's voice Amos Shartle stared and for a moment seemed to come back to reason.

"Gideon! I've been waiting for you."

Gotham Gid sat down on the edge of the couch and waited.

The lips of the young lawyer moved, but no words came from between them.

"Amos, where were you last night?"

"Don't!"

An expression of pain crossed Amos Shartle's face and his hands quivered.

In vain did the detective try to get some coherent reply to his questions.

"What do the doctors say about him?" he asked the nurse.

"They don't give us much hope."

"When did he come home?"

"At half-past one this morning. Mrs. Doran heard him."

Gideon went down-stairs.

Mrs. Doran, talkative and chipper, encountered him in the hall.

"Isn't it just terrible?" cried the little widow.

"About your boarder, Mr. Shartle? Yes. You heard him come in, the nurse says."

"It was half-past one when he went upstairs, for the clock had just struck the half-hour."

"You heard no fall, Mrs. Doran?"

"I did not."

"And knew nothing of his mishap till you found him on the floor this morning?"

"Nothing at all."

"No one came in after him?"

"No one. My other lodger, Mr. Nettles, is out of the city."

"Does he usually remain out till after one?"

"Not often. He comes in generally early, but since the death of his partner, Mr. Hope, he has been out till quite late. But I thought nothing of that, seeing the manner in which Mr. Hope is said to have died."

Armed with the keys to the office on Broadway, Gideon Gale made his way to the now famous place and opened the door.

To him at first sight everything looked quite commonplace, but he suddenly noticed that the carpet was turned up near the table.

Amos had told him about the theft of the packet from the iron box underneath the floor, and in another moment he had pried up the little trap door.

The singular safe was empty.

Of course the detective knew nothing of the scenes of the past night, nothing of the man who came to the office and opened the secret trap.

He knew nothing of the trail, nothing of the encounter on the steps of the strange house, nothing, of course, of the manner of Amos Shartle's home-coming.

For some time the detective gave himself over to thought.

In the armchair in which Harlan Hope was wont to sit he reclined and put his wits to work.

Detectives are not infallible.

The best of them fail to reason out some things that are simple; the keenest lose the clews that lie almost in their hands.

If Amos had been frightened into his present state, whom or what he had seen?

If struck with some blunt or soft weapon, who had wielded it, and where had the tragedy occurred?—in that office?

Gideon Gale was nonplussed.

When he quitted the office, which for the present had failed to give him a clew, he walked rapidly down Broadway.

He was nearing the Battery when he was touched in the throng, and a voice said:

"The tooth has been called for."

Gideon looked down and saw at his side the face of old Cholly, and the little eyes seemed to possess a strange, eager light.

The two walked half a square further, when Gideon turned into another street.

"Now," said he to his friend, who had kept at his heels, "You say it has been called for."

"It has."

"When?"

"Two hours ago."

"By whom?"

"By the owner, I suspect," grinned the old man. "You see, I happened to be at home when I heard some one coming to my room."

"Well?"

"I waited in a fever of excitement, for, although I hadn't heard that step for years, I knew it the moment it fell upon my ears."

"You knew it, did you, Cholly?"

"Didn't I? I felt that I could name the owner of it before the door opened, and when the rap came I was as cool as a summer cucumber. I was ready for him."

The old fellow's face seemed afire with unfeigned delight.

"Well, Mr. Gideon, when I opened the door and saw who stood there I could hardly keep my breath in my body. I invited him inside and handed him the only chair in the place."

"And asked him if he hadn't come for the tooth, eh?"

"No, but I wanted to get at his business as soon as I could. He sat still looking right at me, as if I reminded him of old times, but I stood the stare pretty well. He said at last: 'I saw your advertisement and I'm here for my property.'"

"Which he got, of course?"

"I watched him a minute, and says I: 'I'm glad to have found the owner of the tooth which I picked up on the street,' and he seemed to give a sigh of satisfaction, just as if he was glad to hear me say that it wasn't picked up in any house. I went to my cupboard and brought the tooth over to him. He grabbed at it, carried it to the light, and after a while pulled out a bill and threw it on the table."

"You didn't ask him to prove that he was the owner, Cholly?" asked the detective.

"The proof was before me all the time, for his eagerness told me enough."

"Just so. And when he had secured the bauble he went off with it?"

"Not just then. He stood up, his tall figure showing off in the afternoon light sifting through the panes, and for another half minute he looked at me, to end by saying, sharply: 'I say, daddy, were you ever in Virginny?'"

"He asked you that, did he?"

"I expected some quizzing, I did, for I knew him all the time. It's been years and years since I last saw Sam Cerberus standing on the edge of the swamp at Colledge, holding back the hounds with which we had tracked Black John after the death of the old servant Manoah. He's changed some, of course, but he's still the same tall, dark man with the peaked face, the receding forehead and the long hands that used to scare all the girls on the plantation."

"I guess you must have taken a mental photograph of him, Cholly?"

"Didn't I?" exclaimed the old park loafer. "I wanted a good look at him, and he gave me it. When he asked me if I had ever been in Virginny, I felt that the crisis had come and I kept my nerve. 'Never,' said I, and then he whistled a little, saying that he thought perhaps I had, and went away."

"And you?"

"I did just what you told me to do, Mr. Gideon."

"You didn't let him get away?"

"I didn't."

"Well?"

"He's living in fine style, I take it, judging from the place where I left him."

"Down-town, Cholly?"

"No, sir; up among the nabobs—in a place too stylish for an old duffer like me. Think of Sam Cerberus living in a house with a door what has a gold knocker, from the way it shines. He's changed his name, too, for when I had tracked him home I crossed the street and asked a gentleman at an open window if Mr. Cerberus lived in the fine place, and he laughed."

"Didn't he give you any information concerning the occupant of the house, Cholly?"

"Not much, only he said he believed the occupant was a wealthy person, whose name was not Cerberus."

"Of course you didn't pursue your inquiries any further?"

"I thought it about time to hunt you up with what had happened. But don't let me stand face to face with Sam Cerberus any more."

"You're afraid of breaking down?"

"That's it, precisely. He seems to have the faculty of looking right through one. You never saw such eyes, and while he talked to me it seemed that they looked into the depths of my old heart and called me Perley Prince."

Gideon Gale smiled at the old man's trepidation, and assured him that he would not be put under the strain.

"The tooth is gone, Mr. Gid. The bait was taken in and the man who lost that charm in Harlan Hope's house has been discovered. But is he the man you want?"

"Time will tell, Cholly."

"Keep your secrets, but don't let my throat come within reach of that long hand," and the old man seemed to shudder.

Gideon Gale looked away, but in a moment his gaze came back to old Cholly.

"Jonas South has not returned?" he said.

"Not yet, though I've been watching for that rascal who nearly choked me to death. I've been waiting like a spider in his web for the man who tracked me from the park, and who left me for dead on the floor of my room."

"I have seen Jonas since," said the detective. "In fact, I have been in his house."

"And he didn't try his hand on you, Mr. Gid?"

"He didn't happen to be at home when I called, but I met his friend. Cholly, did you ever hear of Korah?"

For a moment the old man sat still, and then he sprang up and crossed the room like a caged lion.

"You ask me that, do you?" he exclaimed. "You ask me if I ever heard of Korah? Why does everything we talk about go back to the old plantation? Why is it that every turn we make causes me to confront the people who inhabited it? Korah? Have you seen her? Is she in New York?"

"She may be, Cholly."

"Then, in Heaven's name, don't fall into her snares, Mr. Gid. Keep away from Korah."

"That may not be her name now."

"Never mind what it is. The tigress hasn't changed her stripes. Old Cholly knows Korah!"

CHAPTER XIII. FOUND, YET NOT FOUND.

There came over Ruby Hope a strange fear when she heard of Amos Shartle's condition.

She visited him, and for some time sat beside the couch, looking down into the drawn face, and trying to catch the real meaning of the low, incoherent words which now and then parted his lips.

What had he seen?

The distracted girl went home again without being enlightened, and found waiting for her there the detective.

Gideon Gale had called during her absence, and had been admitted by the maid who had taken Iva's place.

Ruby was eager for news, but the ferret had but little to impart, and this did not tend to throw much light on the murderer mystery.

He told her about the visit of the owner of the shark tooth to old Cholly and his recovery of his property, and she recognized him from the old man's description as being the person seen in the library on the day preceding the crime—the lean-faced man in darkish clothes.

"It's Iva I want just now," said the detective. "It is now the girl who told a story, and afterward retracted, calling her first statement false."

"She has not been back. Iva seems to have vanished as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed her or the river closed over her forever."

"Her room is as she left it, is it not?"

"Just the same. I have given the new girl another apartment."

In a few moments the detective stood in the little room formerly occupied by Iva Guant.

"It is at your disposal," said Ruby, leaving him.

During the next few moments the city ferret searched the chamber with the keenest zest.

He now wanted to unearth the missing girl.

Scraps of paper thrown into a little basket in one corner were tilted out on the table and examined one by one.

They revealed nothing in the way of a clew.

Then he went to the pictures on the wall, turning them so as to look behind each one.

At last one which he moved rewarded him, for as he touched it a letter fell to the floor.

Gideon Gale picked it up and carried it over to the light.

It was a letter in a dusty envelope which had been carried in somebody's pocket for some time, and when he drew it forth he saw that it was brief and written in a singular scrawl.

Accustomed to all sorts of writing, the ferret of Gotham mastered the letter and then looked up with a smile.

At that moment the door opened, and the inquisitive face of Ruby Hope appeared there.

"From her mother," said the ferret, handing the surprised girl the discovered missive.

"Her mother?" echoed Ruby. "Why, she once told me that she was quite alone in the world."

"Which only shows that Iva was playing a little game."

Ruby managed to read the letter, and then, with a faint smile, handed it back to the ferret.

"It is six months old," said she.

"I see."

"The writer may have died since then."

"Or have changed her quarters, eh?"

"Precisely. Iva may not have gone to her."

"All of which is true, miss."

"But I see you don't intend to let such probabilities stop you. That is right, Mr. Gale. Follow every clew, no matter how old or how faint it may be."

"Which I am sure you would do were you a detective."

"That I would. If the trail of the murderer led across the sea and through the limitless desert, I would follow it to the end!"

With the address given in the letter in his mind, the ferret of New York bade the lawyer's daughter good-night and left the house.

A letter six months old might not give him a very good clew, still there was none better in sight, and he resolved to run it down at once.

"No. — Mulberry Street," was not in a very aristocratic quarter, and the detective made his way thither as soon as possible.

Almost in the very shadow of the headquarters of New York's police, he was directed by the letter which had dropped like a clew from behind the picture in the maid's chamber.

Night had settled down over the city once more.

In the midst of the strange life of the poor quarter, Gideon Gale found himself drawn thither by his new quest.

It was not tracking Jonas South this time; it was not following the man who had robbed Shartle in the law office. He was looking after one of the links in the chain of evidence—Iva Guant, the missing maid.

Gideon Gale found the number—a tenement—cast in shadow and a human beehive.

Somewhere within its walls the mother of Iva Guant lived six months before.

But in what part of the place? On which floor and in what particular room?

Accustomed to finding people in the hearts of the tenements of Gotham, Quickstep Gideon entered the place between a file of dirty children and began.

In the hallway on the first floor he ran across a tall, ruddy-faced female, who seemed to dispute his further passage as she stood with arms akimbo near the door.

He asked for a Mrs. Guant, who lived in the house.

"Which floor, an' what's her name?"

The detective repeated the name, but could not tell on which floor he expected to find the woman.

"Molly!" cried the Amazon, and Molly, red-faced and vixenish, burst into the hall.

Molly stared at Gideon, and for a moment seemed ready to launch herself upon him.

"Mebbe he means Mrs. Nobbs, mother."

"Oho, she's gone. Went away four months ago," exclaimed the mother.

"Had she a daughter?"

"Yes," put in Molly, "and a nice lady she pretended to be when she came to see her mother, in her good clothes, which she held up, as if our house wasn't good enough for her nibs."

"Did she come often?"

"Once a week, and never in the daytime. Many's the time I heard her on the stairs stepping as noiselessly as a kitten, as if she didn't want us to know she had a mother as poor nor as homely as Mrs. Nobbs."

"Which floor did she occupy?"

"The last, bless you, up near the sky. It's empty now."

"Would you mind showing it to me?"

"The empty room?" cried Molly, with a glance at her mother.

"Yes. The former home of Mrs. Nobbs."

The big girl drew back, and for half a minute looked at the detective sharply.

"What's she done that you want to find her?" she suddenly exclaimed.

"Nothing."

"Then she's wanted because she's that chit's mother. That's it, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, miss."

"Mother, this man is a detective. He wants Mrs. Nobbs, and we are expected to give him the cue."

The face of the Amazon came close to the ferret's, and she looked daggers at him, while her large hands opened and shut spasmodically at her sides.

"They hung my husband and my child's father!" she suddenly hissed.

What could the detective say as he found himself glared at, with the enemy almost at his throat?

"Don't, mother," said the daughter. "You know what he said before they took him off. He killed Flashy Flynn; he didn't deny it, and what else could they do?"

"True, Molly," and the mother simpered down. "Take this man and get him out of the house as soon as possible by showing him all you can."

Five minutes later Gotham Gid stood in a vacant room, and the big girl was talking.

"Here's where the old woman lived, an' to this room the girl came to see her. She came back once after going off—Mrs. Nobbs did—and I asked her where she lived."

"Did she tell you?"

"Not she," and Molly laughed. "You see we never got along with her very well. Once I met her on the stairs, and she came down with all the pride of a peacock, shoving me against the wall. There's pride in that woman; she wasn't always poor."

Molly proceeded and described the girl who came to see Mrs. Nobbs, and the detective knew that it was Iva.

"You never saw her since the last time she came back to the house?" asked Gideon Gale.

"I saw her last night."

"On the street?"

"No; at a window."

"Near here?"

"No. I couldn't have been mistaken, for when you have once seen her you'll know her again among a thousand. I was down on the Battery last night. I came back rather late, and a little funny. Got out of my road and turned up in Hester Street. Never did the like before, as I hope to pass the judgment! You see, one must get that way once in the course of one's life, and that's why I didn't say this before mother."

Molly smiled, and her eyes twinkled.

"It was in Hester Street. I saw Mrs. Nobbs' face at an open window, second floor."

"But you don't know just where?"

"Come! Don't I? If I was a little off, I hadn't lost all my senses, for I recalled her proud antics on the stairs, and I said to myself: 'I'll just spot you, my bird,' which I did. It's not hard to find, the house isn't."

Then Molly leaned toward the detective and in a lower voice gave him the number.

"Thanks, Molly."

"No thanks, sir. I want you to remind her that her feathers aren't any whiter than mine," remarked Molly. "You'll do that, won't you?"

"You'll hear from me," was the reply, and then the detective and his fair guide quitted the chamber.

Found! Traced! and in a short time he would see whether Iva Guant was in hiding with her mother.

It did not take the indefatigable ferret long to turn up in Hester Street.

It took him a shorter time to find the number designated by Molly, and he stood before the little house beyond whose door might lie the key to the Harlan Hope mystery.

The hour was not late, and the human life that jostles one late into the night in that quarter of the metropolis was very active.

He mounted the steps and rang the bell.

Falling back, he waited for the answer and at last footsteps came down the hall inside.

The detective heard a key turn in the lock, he saw the door swing ajar, and the next instant, as a piercing cry welled from a female's throat, he saw that same door slammed in his face.

All this in the space of half a second.

Before the door could be barred against his entrance, the city ferret turned the knob and threw it open.

He tramped into a dark hallway.

"He's inside, mother!" cried a voice. "In God's name, how did he find us? But everything is possible with men of his class. I will not see him. I will die rather than tell him what I know!"

Then the voice died away, and the silence that came after it was almost palpable.

The detective had found Iva Guant, but that was all,

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING TRAIL.

What was he to do?

Quit the house in Hester Street and let the girl go?

Gotham Gid had not come to that point of the game to give up the search thus.

"I will die rather than tell him what I know!"

These words sounded still in the detective's ears.

Then she knew.

The secret of the mystery was hers.

Iva Guant knew who came to the lawyer's house that eventful night, and the story she had told was, after all, a cunningly devised fabrication.

For half a minute the ferret of New York stood in the darkness of the hall.

The voice had died away, but he seemed to hear it yet.

At last he pushed forward and gained a door whose knob he found in the shadows.

It opened suddenly in his face.

In another moment he had stepped into a dimly-lighted room, and stood face to face with an elderly woman.

Was this Mrs. Guant, or "Mrs. Nobbs," as Molly of the tenement had called her.

"So you are the detective?" said the woman, gazing into Gideon's face.

"I am Gideon Gale, madam. Your daughter is here. I would see her."

Without a word the woman turned toward a door on the opposite side of the chamber, and seemed to smile.

"You are too late. She is gone."

Gone!

A minute too late!

The detective sprang across the room, but the hand of the woman fell upon his arm.

"Sit down," said she, in commanding tones. "I don't intend to deceive you. I am her mother."

The city ferret did not take a chair, but remained standing with folded arms.

"You propose to keep me from her trail, I see."

"Not so. You could not find her if you were to search the city. She is beyond reach of your hands. She is gone, I say."

"With your consent?"

"By my advice. I told her to go—to baffle you!"

"Then you would defeat justice."

"You may say that. Iva may know something, but her lips are sealed, and shall remain so as long as I can sway her."

The woman before the detective was determined and cool.

"Come, you shall search the house," she continued. "You shall see that she is not here. Out yonder is your trail. You can take it, to be baffled in the end."

She opened a door as she finished, and waved the ferret forward, but he did not move.

"Your daughter made a false statement."

"Perhaps. You refer to what she saw in Harlan Hope's house the night of the crime?"

"Yes."

"She told them that she saw the murderer committed."

"She did."

"She saw more than that, Sir Ferret," and the woman laughed. "She saw more than you suspect."

"But she will not tell."

"Never, sir. You will see her lips close forever behind her secret."

"Is she oathbound?"

"By no means."

"Was she threatened?"

"Not at all."

"Madam, your daughter shall speak. One of these days her lips will become unsealed, and she will tell what she really saw."

"I say never."

Gotham Gid was losing time in this parley.

Iva might be putting squares between him and the secret, and he longed to be again upon the trail.

"Time will tell," said he, facing the woman, as he fell back toward the door.

"Time may, but my child's tongue will not."

"Good-night, madam."

She went to the door with him.

"When you have found the true solution to the mystery let us know, please."

It was the height of sarcasm, and the detective bowed his way across the threshold and saw the door shut in his face.

Baffled by two women.

The chagrin that took possession of the ferret's soul rankled there.

So near Iva Guant and to have missed her!

He felt for a moment like going back into the house with the suddenness of a thunderbolt.

Perhaps the girl was still there.

He had not searched the place.

He turned away, however, but not without a last look at the place where he had been made to chew the bitter quid of disappointment.

All at once a figure flitted round the corner just before him, and he started.

Iva Guant!

In another moment the ferret was on the trail.

Round the corner he went, and saw the dark figure once more.

Surely he had found the missing girl.

On the street the detective was at his best, and he kept the fleeting one in sight.

Not for a moment would he lose sight of her now, and her mother might laugh at his discomfiture while he ran to earth the girl who had baffled him that night.

The figure gave him a long chase.

He saw it plunge into a park, and he followed it, to come out on the other side, still on the trail.

"In Heaven's name, where is the girl going?" the ferret asked himself.

On, still on, he was led through lamp-light and shadow, and at last he saw his quarry turn into the street where the Hope mansion stood.

"She can't be going back to the old place," thought Gotham Gid.

She went to the door and up the steps.

He saw her unlock the portal with a key which she took from her dress and the next moment she vanished.

These proceedings startled the detective.

To have followed Iva Guant back to the scene of the murder and to have seen her coolly enter the house with the aid of a latch-key was astonishing.

The detective came alongside the place and waited a few moments.

Iva had time to reach her old room, for such evidently was her intention.

He mounted the steps himself and rang. She should not escape him now.

For a little while there was no answer to his ring, and then footsteps came down the hall.

The door opened, and he stood face to face with Ruby.

There was a quick start on the young girl's part, and her face lost color, which the detective quickly noted.

"She came in here a moment ago," said he, catching Ruby's wrist and dropping his voice to a whisper as he threw a hasty glance up the broad stairs.

"She?" echoed the startled girl, falling back a step. "You don't mean—"

"Iva is in the house! I have tracked her back. She entered by the aid of a night key. Is she up-stairs? You must have heard the door."

There was no reply, and the form of Ruby Hope seemed to quiver before the detective's gaze.

"I did not hear the door?" she answered.

"But you were wide awake."

"Yes, all the time. Is it possible that you have been deceived, Mr. Gale?"

He deceived?

Impossible!

What had he been doing during the last twenty minutes but tracking the girl with the secret?

There had been no mistake.

He had never failed to keep the tracked person in sight, and Iva had not deceived him.

"Deceived?" he echoed. "It is simply impossible, Miss Hope. Iva entered this house not five minutes ago."

"Then she must be here still."

"In her room, perhaps."

Gotham Gid looked toward the staircase, and the girl waved her hand in that direction.

"We will go up and see," she said, and they were on the carpeted steps.

Ruby led the way, quite cool now. Gotham Gid was at her heels, eager to look into the maid's room, fully expecting to surprise her there.

"The door has been unlocked all day," explained Ruby, as they approached the apartment. "You see it is so now," and she opened it cautiously.

The detective of New York stopped on the threshold of the maid's room, and with Ruby Hope looked into it partially revealed by the light which burned further down the little upper hallway.

The place was empty.

To all appearances, the room had not been visited since his last entrance, when he found the letter which gave him the clew to Iva's mother.

"She entered this house, miss; there's no mistake about that," he said, with positiveness. "I tracked her to the door and saw her enter."

As he spoke he looked full into the girl's face.

It was the color of chalk, and her lips quivered.

At the same moment his gaze fell to her shoes, the tips of which peeped out from beneath the hem of her dress.

They were dusty.

To the hem of the outer garment clung particles of Gotham's grime, as if the wearer had been out.

A startling thought flashed across the detective's mind.

Ruby Hope seemed to comprehend what had taken place, for she fell back, looking at him, but with suddenly dropping eyes.

"You have been out, miss," said the detective. "Pardon me, but you have just come in from the street."

A cry welled from the girl's heart, and she tottered forward.

"My God!" she exclaimed. "You have

no mercy. You track all who cross your path."

She stood over against the wall, looking at him with breathless terror.

"I have been deceived," continued the ferret. "I thought I was tracking Miss Guant, but you were the quarry."

Ruby gasped, and seemed to straighten, as if her old courage had come back.

Her eyes flashed up like beacon fires.

"What right have you to track me?" she cried. "What right have you to play sleuthhound on my trail?"

"What right have you to enact the role of Iva Guant?" demanded the city Vidocq.

"Did I enact it? Do I look like that woman? Appearances deceive one after dark. I have been out. I have been where I chose to go, and you, detective and clew-hunter though you are, have no right to question my motives."

She was calm again, and her trepidation had vanished. She stood before him like a woman cool enough to hold her own, and her ungloved hand covered him like a weapon as she cried:

"Iva Guant did not come back to-night. I am the woman whom you tracked. Now, what are you going to do about it, Gideon Gale?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE DETECTIVE'S PRIZE.

Ay, what was he going to do about it?

The victory seemed to be in Miss Ruby's hands, and she enjoyed the detective's chagrin.

"I don't dispute your right to go out at all hours," said he. "But you must admit that you were tracked from a tough part of the city."

"Admitted," was the reply. "You were at my heels and you mistook me for Iva."

Gideon had to admit that she was right, and for half a second they faced one another without speaking.

"Explanations may come later on, but not to-night," and with this she turned and led the way down-stairs, forcing him to follow, for he could do nothing else.

In the hall below she held out her hand and continued, looking archly into his face:

"Go out to the trail. It is yonder. But do not forget Amos Shartle. He may tell what he knows."

Gideon Gale found himself on the steps of the Hope mansion, with his brain in a whirl of excitement.

He had been dismissed in a manner which he could not resist, and with the night air in his face he walked away.

A few minutes later he turned up in his own quarters, found nothing there for him, and went away again.

He visited Amos Shartle and tiptoed into the lawyer's room to find a professional nurse with him, who could give him no good news.

Amos had had few intervals of sanity, but these were so brief as to give no assurances that he would ever narrate the cause of his strange state.

"What do the doctors say now?" asked Gideon.

"They attribute it to fright—sudden fright," was the reply. "He must have witnessed something that turned his brain. If he could be traced we might get at the cause of his trouble, but that seems impossible."

"We must trust to time and fortune. There seems no other way," remarked the detective, preparing to leave.

Midway on the stairs the ferret heard the nurse calling him, and he went back.

Amos Shartle was sitting bolt upright in bed and was talking rapidly.

Both the ferret and the nurse exchanged glances.

"Amos!" cried Gideon, bending over the lawyer, and the next moment Shartle's eyes were turned toward him with a sane expression.

"Gideon, where have I been? Is he there yet? Look on the step, please."

The detective held his breath with anxiety, and for a little while feared that the lawyer would settle back into the old state of incoherency.

The nurse caught up a wine-glass on the table and held it to Amos Shartle's lips.

"It was awful, Gideon," he went on. "It came to me like a vision from the grave."

"What did, Amos?"

"That face—that dead, murdered face."

"He's gone back," whispered the nurse.

"Don't you know that I tracked him home, watched the house, and even went up the steps, when the door opened and out he came?"

"He, Amos?"

"The living dead, Gideon."

"And you saw him?"

"Didn't I? Ah, I even pulled off the iron gray beard, pulled it off in the struggle we had there. Then I saw the face, the hooked nose, the little, deep-set eyes, none others like them in all New York, and then—"

Amos Shartle, as if suddenly overcome, fell back on the pillows, but the detective caught him.

"Go on," said he.

Once more the brain seemed to turn against him.

Again the old strain of meaningless words poured rapidly from the lawyer's lips, and the detective looked his deep disappointment.

It was too late; the madness had come back.

"Watch him closely," said Gideon to the nurse. "He may come out of the spell. Catch every word he utters from now till the time I come back."

"To-night?"

"Yes, between now and midnight."

With another look at the lawyer, Gideon Gale went away.

"He was on the verge of the whole secret," he thought. "In another moment I would have held it in my possession and would have known what startled him. He will tell it before long, perhaps to-night."

Down on the street and near the house stood a man who appeared to be watching the premises.

Gideon caught sight of him, though his figure was hid in the shadows, and when he glided away he discovered that he had the man at his heels.

"Waiting for me, eh?" he exclaimed, under his breath. "My good fellow, you may see more of Gideon Gale than you care about."

It was the detective's intention to toll the spy to a spot where he could get the upper hand of him, and show him that tracking a detective was profitless work for a man of his caliber.

There was no doubt in the ferret's mind that he had been seen to enter the house where Amos Shartle lay and that the spy had been lying in wait for him.

For some time the shadow and his tracker moved on, the former taking glances at the indefatigable fellow, and at last Gideon turned into a little square and made his way to one of the settees near the middle.

He stopped so suddenly that the man, then but a few feet behind him, was nonplussed, and the next moment, as if believing that the ferret had all this time been unconscious of the espionage, came sauntering by.

It was Gideon's time.

He waited till the tracker came abreast of the settee, when all at once he sprang up and stopped him.

The nearest light did not show him the man's face to any degree of certainty, but Gideon did not let this interfere with his intentions.

"Come, sit down," said he, pulling the man toward the settee. "We ought to be acquainted."

"I don't know you."

"But you shall. You are Jonas South."

"I Jonas South?"

"Jonas South, the taxidermist. How's the frog market, Jonas?"

A queer smile passed over the man's face, and he sullenly accepted the seat offered alongside the city ferret.

"You vary your profession," resumed the detective. "You play shadow now and then."

"Never, sir. I was on my way home."

"Like you were the night you followed old Cholly from the Battery?"

There was a short little cry from the man's lips, and he fell back looking at the detective like an astonished person.

"Don't you know that a little more squeezing and Cholly would not be breathing just now?"

The long, slender hands of the man beside the detective were suddenly put away, but Gideon's eyes followed them.

"You didn't get anything from the room, did you? You made a water haul that time."

"I got nothing."

The words were snapped out.

"Simply because old Cholly had nothing for you. You can't rob a pauper of anything, Jonas. Better stick to your trade."

"That's right, but what's all this got to do with your making me listen to you?"

"A good deal, perhaps. You weren't lost at sea that time."

"No. The devil keeps his own, they say."

"You haven't been to see your cast-off wife lately?"

"Do you know her? Do you know Mother Trumps?"

"Why not? She's managed to keep before the public pretty well."

"Yes, yes. I don't care to see her."

"No? But there's the other woman—there's Korah, Jonas."

This time the man started violently, and his face lost color.

"You were tracking me to-night. Come, admit it."

"What if I were?"

"You were serving your master."

"I have no master."

"Your mistress, then."

"I know none."

"I don't mean Mother Trumps, for you are two, and have been ever since you vanished from the old Virginia plantation."

"You've pumped old Cholly."

"Never mind. You see I know something about your past. Jonas, and it isn't as bright as a shield."

The man seemed to bite his nether lips through.

"You're the sharp," said he. "You're the lynx of the trail—the shadow in the case."

"I am," and the gaze of Gideon Gale seemed to transfix the other like a dart. "I am the detective in the case, and you are my prisoner. You have deftly fallen into a snare of your own setting."

Jonas South seemed to be thinking rapidly.

He had fallen into the hands of the law; he had ensnared himself and the grip of the spotter had closed on him.

"Korah told you about my visit to your house. She told you how she found me in the little workshop when she came to see you."

"She told me, that's right."

"Did she tell you how she wanted to fix me with the dagger?"

"No, but she hinted at it. That's her all over. She didn't get to because of that man of yours."

"My man," as you call him, was too much for Korah. She lost her dagger."

"Lost it entirely?"

"Yes, dropped it on the floor and my man picked it up."

"The black-handled one, eh?"

"It has a black handle."

"Which of course you have examined carefully?"

"Yes, we've looked at it pretty thoroughly, Jonas."

"Took it off, of course?"

Gideon nodded, though he had done nothing of the kind.

"That marks Korah for you," continued the frog man. "That gives the whole thing away."

"Yes."

Jonas South took a long breath and looked away for a moment.

"I guess there's no escaping you," said he. "What a fool I was to-night to wait till you came out of that house."

"What luck it was for me that you waited."

"Of course. Now the jig's up; now good-by to my frogs and my occupation."

"Not necessarily so," answered the detective. "There's more than a chance for you, Jonas."

"How so?"

"Where does Korah live?"

"No, not that!" and the speaker fell back with a shudder. "I know what's what, I'm no fool."

"You are not suspected of being such, but you don't want to go behind the bars."

"And I don't want to betray Korah."

"Vera, you mean."

"Great God! you've got things down pat. You must know all about the Major, too," and then, as if he had gone too far, he shut up like a clam, and no amount of questioning could open his mouth again.

Gideon saw that his captive knew more than he cared to tell.

He had picked up the right man, and he had been led to the threshold of an important secret, and while he thought he recalled old Cholly's story of the plantation crime.

"So the Major's here, is he?" he said, leaning toward Jonas South. "Dandy Finch has changed his name."

The effect was electric.

Jonas South leaped up with a cry and in another second was out of sight.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STARRED ACE.

There was no catching the man who had bolted.

Gideon Gale watched him till he vanished, and then smiled to himself.

The prey had slipped through his hands, but he did not intend to pursue it.

He let Jonas South go.

For some time after he left the little square Jonas walked rapidly and at last turned up in a street where he found a house, at the door of which he rang.

He was admitted, where he soon stood face to face with a man who looked at him curiously, as he regarded him in turn.

"You're excited," said the man watched by Jonas, a good-looking personage, a little gray.

"Somewhat," was the reply.

"Have you been tracked?"

"I was caught."

"Caught? By whom?"

"By a detective."

"The deuce you were! See here. Don't you think you would do better if you stuck to your trade?"

"Perhaps," there was a twinge of acidity in Jonas' tones and he moved toward the other one.

"You mean if I kept indoors and never went out to get a breath of air I would fare better than I did a while ago?"

"No, I don't mean that you ought to make a prisoner of yourself, but you surely ought to stick to your trade a little better, and then you wouldn't be picked up by the shadows."

"I see."

"But who captured you?"

"The man in the game—the human hunter who calls himself Gideon Gale."

"Just so, but I see he didn't hold you."

"Not much. I wouldn't be here if he had had his way about the matter."

"Are you sure you gave him the slip—that he didn't follow you here?"

"I know he did not. But look here."

"Well?"

"He's been in my house. Did Vera tell you?"

"She did not. Does Vera know?"

"She met him there."

"What? You don't say that she has stood face to face with this man?"

"She has—she tried to dagger him, but was prevented by his man."

"This is news."

The man whom Jonas addressed leaned over the table and pulled a brown cord that hung from the ceiling.

"Is she in the house?" asked Jonas.

"She was a while ago."

In a short time footsteps were heard on

a stairs beyond the door and then Vera came in.

She started a little when she saw Jonas South seated at the table, but her gaze immediately passed over to the handsome man who had rung for her.

Major Nightshade—this was the redoubtable Major whom we have met before—seemed to transfix her with his gray orbs, and for a moment remained silent.

"Jonas here has just revealed a secret," he said.

Vera's lips seemed to curl with a haughty smile.

"He says you have encountered the detective."

She looked at Jonas half rebukingly, but with a toss of her head turned again to Major Nightshade.

"What of it?" she exclaimed.

"You never told me."

"Was I compelled to tell you?"

"Not compelled, but you knew that I would have listened with interest to the story of the meeting."

"It was not very much," with a wave of the hand. "We came together accidentally."

"Where?"

"In Jonas' house."

"Were you there, too, Jonas?"

"I was out at the time, but if I had remained a little longer I might have taken a hand in the interview myself."

Major Nightshade's face seemed to lose a little color, and he toyed for a moment with a paper-knife on the yellow cloth.

"Jonas says you tried to dagger him. It must have been a very exciting interview."

"Somewhat," smiled Vera, drawing up her handsome figure. "It was a little testify on my part."

"But you failed?"

"Yes, his spy came into the room and interfered."

"His spy?"

"The Terrier—that's what they call him. I failed to cut him, for he seized my wrist and I had to relinquish the dagger."

"Which you got again, of course?"

Vera and Jonas exchanged quick glances.

"Certainly," said the woman. "You don't suppose I would come away without the knife?"

"I didn't think so," said Major Nightshade. "Jonas has seen the detective."

In another instant Vera had come over to where Jonas South sat, and her hand fell upon his arm.

"You've seen him since, have you?" she exclaimed. "Where was he then?"

"In the street."

"Tracking you?"

"He caught me," grinned Jonas.

"Caught you—the detective in the case? You let him catch you, eh?"

"I—I couldn't help it under the circumstances. I did the best I could."

"And you let him pump you dry, Jonas?"

"Never a secret nor the semblance of one did that man twist from me!" cried Jonas, touching his breast in the most solemn manner. "I sealed my lips. I left him as much in the dark as he was before he nailed me."

Meantime Major Nightshade was narrowly watching the couple, and suddenly he exclaimed:

"This must end. There is but one thing to be done."

"I've told you that a dozen times. Each day lessens the chances of success."

Vera had whirled toward him and stood like a beautiful tigress in the light, her bosom rising and falling with poorly suppressed excitement, and her eyes seemingly on fire.

"Now or never!" she went on. "Death to the ferret or doom for all of us."

"You are right."

Vera seemed to shrink back into the depths of the chair.

He did not speak.

"This man is the danger spot. This keen-witted detective, who never quits a trail until he stands triumphant at the end of it, is the one to be feared."

"She's right," put in Jonas, with a slight tremor.

Major Nightshade pulled open a drawer and dived his hand into it.

He drew out a package not much larger than his hand and nearly flat.

When he had opened the packet a small black box was revealed, and this he opened in turn with a snap.

Both Jonas and the woman watched him.

"Gods!" said the former, under his breath. "I haven't seen them for years. They're the same old dice."

By this time Major Nightshade had taken from the black box four small dice and was juggling with them in his brown hand.

He suddenly threw them on the table.

Vera, starting forward, watched him intently, but Jonas South did not stir.

"You haven't seen these for some time, eh, Jonas?"

"Not for years—not since I left Virginia."

"Not since the night of the ninth, eh?"

Jonas shuddered.

"You're right—not since then," he dropped his voice to a whisper.

Major Nightshade pulled a hat toward him and suddenly tossed the ivory squares into it.

"One at a time," said he.

"Why not all of us?" asked Vera.

"We might clash. You know where he is, so does Jonas. I can find him."

"And Sam?"

"Oh," with a laugh, "we can tell him when he comes again."

Vera was now at the edge of the table, and her face was white and tensely drawn.

"Come, Jonas," said she, glancing at the taxidermist. "This is a lottery of death. We draw for the starred dice."

Jonas South started up with a slight cry and raised his hand above the hat.

"All hands in!" cried Major Nightshade. "All at once, now. There will be one dice left, and we'll call that Sam's."

In another moment three hands disappeared in the hat, and then came out shut.

The man with the handsome face looked over the rim of the hat and smiled:

"It's not Sam's mission."

Jonas South held his hand beneath the table and glanced at its contents.

He did not seem to shudder now, but his lips came closer together.

Vera looked also at her dice and Major Nightshade seemed to take the merest glance toward his hand.

"Cast them back and let the drawer of the starred ace go forth to duty."

The dice were thrown back into the hat and Vera said, with a sharp laugh:

"There must be no failure this time. There must be no long time between this hour and the blow."

Jonas nodded and the Major calmly put the four dice back into the black box.

Jonas South picked up his hat and turned to the door.

"Don't let him catch you again, Jonas," said the Major.

"I shall not."

The words forced welded lips apart, and the speaker's eyes grew fiery.

As the door closed on Jonas, Vera and Major Nightshade exchanged glances, and the latter said, as he snapped the four dice up in their little prison

"Everything is ready for the grand coup, my dear. But one event stands between us and the prize."

"The doom of the detective?"

"Yes, the throttling of this trail wolf—the end of the man called Gideon Gale."

Vera did not reply, but, hearing a noise in the hall, bounded across the room and came face to face with Jonas South near the front door.

He started toward her as she came in sight, and his hand closed on her arm.

"I didn't tell him all," said he. "I didn't tell him that the detective has the dagger you dropped in my house. He has discovered its secret. He has removed the hilt."

For a moment the woman gasped.

"You got the starred dice, didn't you?" she asked.

"I got it."

"Then I will help you. We two ought to be a match for this troubler of our peace. Where can I see you within an hour?"

"At home."

"I will be on hand. Be careful. Don't let him find you again," and Vera went back to Major Nightshade.

CHAPTER XVII.

CREEPERS DELIVERS UP.

When Gideon Gale went home after his interview with Jonas South in the park or square he thought of one thing the man had said.

He went straight to a little cupboard set deftly in the wall and took from it a black-handled dagger, the one left behind by Vera in her flight from the taxidermist's house.

He had let Jonas understand that he had removed the hilt of the dagger and got at the secret to be secured by doing so, but, in fact, he had done nothing of the kind.

He now carried the blade over to the table and sat down for the purpose of investigating.

He soon discovered that the polished hilt of the weapon was removable, and after a little manipulation he succeeded in laying it on the cloth before him.

He saw that the hilt was hollow, but he could not see that it contained anything.

When he shook it over the table, however, he was startled to see a roll of paper drop from it, and, throwing down the hilt, he soon had the roll in his hand.

The Quickstep Detective unrolled the paper with eager hands and held it up before him.

At first nothing was seen that promised to reward his efforts, but he discovered that the bit of paper was covered with somewhat pale writing.

Jonas had unintentionally put him on to something important.

The detective, after a little trial, caught the trend of the writing, which at first looked like an unintelligible scrawl, and in a little time had read as follows:

"I am the Dagger of Doom. I never strike twice. I belong to the Hand that never fails. I sweep from my path all who oppose me. I can kill with one stroke, and the hand that wields me is certain. Whether I have a master or a mistress, I am Death. That is my name. Just now I belong to

"KORAH THE INVINCIBLE."

The detective read this twice before he looked up.

"Korah is Vera in other places," thought he. "She is the woman who came to Jonas South's shop the time I went thither with the Terrier. She would have killed the Terrier, but his arm was too quick for her. Jonas thought I had taken off the hilt before to-night, but he was mistaken."

Gideon Gale did not restore the paper to the dagger hilt, but put it securely away and screwed the hilt itself back to its place.

What had he found—another link?

Had the dagger really given him anything upon which he could depend?

Time would tell.

The Quickstep Detective hid the blade and went out.

There was one thing that still mystified him, and now was the time to look it up.

He had plenty of time to go back to Amos Shartle's house before midnight, but just now he wanted to see the man who had given him a glimpse of his face the time he called at Mother Trumps' house in hopes of finding a clew to the thief of the packet from the law office—the man with the cold hand.

Gideon Gale bent his footsteps in the direction of the house and once more stood at the door.

This time he did not knock, but turned the knob to find the door unlocked and in he walked.

Once more he found himself in the hall where he had been confronted by Molly

Brass, but this time the girl Amazon was not there to bar his progress.

Gideon listened in the hall a moment, and heard voices which seemed to come from beyond the door at the end of it.

He passed down the almost lightless corridor and in a little time opened the door there.

There was a quick cry and a little hurried scrambling, and he stood face to face with Molly Brass and a man.

The two had been seated at a table, upon which there was a pitcher of beer, and as soon as they saw the detective they sprang up and looked at him with staring eyes, forming a vivacious tableau.

"It's him. It's the man who came before," said the girl, the first to speak, sending a look at her companion.

The man said nothing.

Gideon Gale advanced, and with a smile held out his hand.

"Well, Mr. Creepers, how are you tonight?" he said.

The other hesitated.

"Shake with him," put in Molly. "Make the best of a bad bargain."

The hand withheld till that moment came forward, and the instant it touched the detective's, Gideon knew he had found his man.

The hand was as cold as ice!

Indeed, it seemed to send a chill through the ferret's blood and he looked at it to see that it was unnaturally white.

"There's no blood in it," explained Molly.

"I would think so," replied the detective, and then he relinquished the member and looked at its owner.

"I'm rather glad you came," continued the girl, who seemed to persist in doing most of the talking. "I had almost persuaded Crowley here to go to you."

"She had me nearly there," said the man. "I didn't like to go, for, to tell the truth, I don't like detectives."

"No?"

"I was always that way. I know what you're after."

Gideon Gale made no reply, but waited for the man to proceed.

It was evident that he had made up his mind to talk, but he suddenly said:

"I want it understood that he don't owe his present affliction to me."

"I believe you. Amos Shartle didn't see you to fall into his present condition."

"You're right. I robbed him. I'll admit that."

"You're the man who robbed him of the packet he had just placed under the floor?"

"I'm the man. I thought I had a right to it."

"You thought you had a right to plunder him? Didn't you know that the packet belonged to another?"

"To Harlan Hope? Of course; and that's why I wanted it."

"Exactly."

Here Molly Brass leaned toward the detective, and her hand fell upon his arm.

"I went thither for just what I got. I thought it might be found in the safe in the office, but what was my surprise when I saw Amos Shartle putting it into the treasure box under the floor."

"You thought it was in the office safe, you say?"

"I did."

"Then you suspected the existence of the packet."

"I did. I resolved to get possession of it if it cost me my very life."

"It must have been of great value to you."

"I considered it so, but the best of us make mistakes."

Crowley Creepers, with a glance at Molly, burst into a laugh.

"I was fooled that time. I didn't find what I went after," said Creepers.

"But you told Amos Shartle that you had followed Miss Ruby Hope down-town when she carried the packet to the office."

"I did see the girl, and suspected that she had something, and it all at once occurred to me that she had brought the packet to the lawyer."

"You didn't find what you wanted, you say?"

"I did not. I simply made a water-haul, so far as my interests were concerned."

Creepers crossed the room and ran one of his hands underneath the bolster of a couch that stood in one corner.

"This is it," said he, coming back to the table. "To tell the truth, I was on the eve of taking it back and placing it in the treasure box under the floor. I have no use for this."

"It doesn't concern you, then?"

"Not at all. To be plain, for there's no use concealing anything from you, I wanted to get possession of some papers held by Harlan Hope—papers bearing on a case entrusted to him years ago. I thought he had those papers somewhere, and as they greatly interest me, I got it into my head that he would hide them in a safe spot. I went to the office with the intention of breaking open the safe and ransacking it, but what I saw changed my plans. How did Amos Shartle come to give you the clew to me?"

"You forget your peculiar hand."

"Curse the hand! the legacy left me by my father, who was similarly afflicted. It has no blood in it, sir—the circulation stops at the elbow, though there seems to be a pulse. He felt his blood grow cold while I held him, eh?"

"So he said."

"Who does not?" broke in Molly Brass, with a smile. "I can't touch that hand without shuddering."

"There's the package," and Creepers tossed the long-sought object upon the table. "You see we have dabbled with the seal. I tried to get it open without tampering with it, but couldn't, and so Molly cut the cords."

The hand of the detective fell upon the packet.

"It's the strangest find you ever heard of," continued Creepers. "I never read such statements. They must have been written by a madman. Why, sir, they tell of a murder somewhere in Virginia years and years ago, and it looks as if the man who wrote the account had been accused of it."

"There's a woman in the case, as there usually is," remarked Molly Brass.

"Yes, but that's not the strangest part of the narrative," put in Creepers. "It tells about a brother—a twin brother, I believe—who went away from home many years ago, and who is now in this city somewhere."

"With the knowledge of the man who wrote out the narrative?"

"Just so. But read it."

"Not now," said the detective, putting the packet into an inside pocket, which it filled.

"You intend to read it, don't you? I hear that Harlan Hope is dead, and, putting this and that together, he must have died the night after Amos Shartle received this thing from the girl."

"That is the case."

"He sent it to the office for safe keeping, and if I had but known the truth, I wouldn't have bothered Amos, and the narrative would be there now."

"You may have saved it, Creepers."

"Then I did some good, eh? I saved it from another plundering hand."

"Doubtless."

"Do you think the person who took Harlan Hope's life went to the house for this packet?"

"It might have been thus."

"Gods! Then I am glad that I got it that night. I didn't intend to keep it, but I couldn't just see my way clear to restore it, under the circumstances."

"It's all right now, Creepers."

The Quickstep Detective moved toward the door, but Creepers sprung quickly after him.

"It's precious!" cried the man. "If the murderer went to the old lawyer's house for that document, and, failing to find it, took his life, they would not stop to kill you for it."

"They?"

"Yes. From reading the narrative Molly and I have decided that there is more than one person who wants to suppress

its story and to get hold of its information."

"I'll risk taking care of it, Creepers."

"But you're going out into the night with it. You may have been followed to our house."

"I think not."

"You don't know."

"I'll go with you. I'll see that you're escorted to your rooms, or to where you intend going after leaving here."

"It's not necessary, Creepers. Good-night. You shall not suffer for the little affair in the office."

Gideon Gale opened the door and stepped into the hall on his way toward the street.

"Don't take no for an answer," cried Molly, clutching Creepers' arm. "Follow him! Become his shadow wherever he goes. Don't let them kill the detective. He's our friend from now on, and we must defend him!"

The man with the cold hand nodded approvingly and waited for Gideon to quit the house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HAWK AND BUZZARD AGAIN.

Jonas South was the holder of the fatal dice.

His luck or misfortune had been to draw the one with a star about the ace, and he had confessed to Vera that such had been his fate.

After quitting the house where the drawing had taken place—the home of the man known as Major Nightshade—Jonas kept in the shadows of the buildings and made his way to his little workshop where the frogs greeted him.

He did not know that he had been followed, but such was the case.

The man who was about to enter Major Nightshade's house as Jonas emerged turned after him and kept him in sight.

This person, lean-faced and quick of step, did not pause till he had tracked the taxidermist home, and, not content with this, he plunged into the house after Jonas before he had time to close and lock the door.

Jonas heard him in the hall, and, turning on the light, he stood face to face with Sam Cerberus.

Major Nightshade's man had a derisive smile on his face and while South watched it it seemed to deepen.

"You're going back to the shop, aren't you?" said Cerberus, advancing. "You've just come home. I'll go in with you, Jonas."

This was not the very thing Jonas wanted, but the next thing was to treat this man with some condescension.

Therefore the taxidermist led the way to the workshop, and after closing the door he motioned Sam Cerberus to a chair, while he took the one at the bench.

"You've been to see him, haven't you?" were the first words Cerberus spoke.

"You know that, do you?"

"I know pretty nearly everything."

"I guess that's true."

"You've had a talk with him. You know what he is going to do?"

"Perhaps."

Jonas tried to assume an off-hand manner, but it did not go down very well with his visitor.

"Don't you think it a grand scheme?"

"All his schemes generally are."

"Yes, and they've all panned out very well."

"The last one did, anyhow."

"What last one?"

"You know."

The two men were looking at one another as if both had a secret which they did not care to air just then.

"He expects to break ground to-morrow," continued Sam. "Vera will not wait and I don't see why he need hold back any longer. The plum is ripe."

"He ought to know."

Now Jonas did not know much about Major Nightshade's "great scheme," though, if pressed, he might have said that he had a pretty fair idea of it; but Cerberus did not press the question.

"The Major is sanguine, but, Jonas,

you know that some one stands in the way."

There was no reply.

Perhaps at that moment Jonas South thought of the starred dice.

"There's many a slip," said he, glancing at Sam Cerberus.

"Too many, sometimes. What did he tell you, Jonas?"

"Not much."

"He said but little about the coming play, I guess."

"Not a great deal."

"No? Vera, as I have said, is very eager to play the hand, for, if rightly played, there's a cool five hundred thousand in it."

"So much?" asked Jonas, with a little start.

"More than that, but it's owing to the shape his wealth was in. The old man was rich. Eric Lee got hold of that part of the old Virginia estate which belonged to his twin brother, Marvin, and, as Harlan Hope, he added a good deal to it. But, Jonas, do you ever fall to thinking that Marvin Lee may be living."

"I thought so once, but now I don't."

"What changed your mind?"

"I can hardly say."

"Years have passed since then."

"A good many of them," said Jonas.

"Marvin went off under a cloud, too."

"Just like Eric, or Harlan Hope."

"Exactly."

"Marvin must be dead."

"Ha, you think so, do you?"

"I only imagine so."

In another moment Sam Cerberus had left his chair and had come over to where Jonas South sat.

"Hark ye, Jonas. Listen to me. There's millions in it, as the saying goes, for us. There need be but one division."

"What's that? You don't mean that you have discovered Marvin Lee, Harlan Hope's twin brother."

"Did I say so?"

"No; but—"

"Oh, you were going to take the words out of my mouth, were you?"

Jonas smiled.

"Now, supposing we could lay hands on this man; supposing you and I, Jonas, could unearth Marvin Lee, what would be easier than to make a great bargain with him?"

"I—don't—know about that," slowly said Jonas.

"You don't, eh? Well, I do. Here's the layout: Harlan Hope is dead. If this long-missing brother could be found he would come in for his own share of the original estate, besides some from that of the old lawyer. It would look a little like cheating a girl out of her rights, but, pshaw! Jonas, you and I wouldn't stop at a little thing like that, would we?"

Jonas winced a little, and said "I guess not," with a smile.

"Of course not. It would be blocking the Major's little game—it would be balking Vera's ambition, but you and I have as good a right to live as any other brace of buzzards! Ha, ha!"

"Just so. I'm confident that Major Nightshade, judging from what we know of him, will not give us a fair share of the spoils, but that he may leave us entirely in the lurch after using us."

"You hit the nail on the head like the old Jonas. That's just what he will do. Now!"

Sam seemed to bend his body forward till it almost touched the expectant face of Jonas South.

"I know where Marvin Lee is," he said, sinking his voice to a low whisper.

"You don't say that."

"I do, and I will swear to it on a stack of Bibles. I know! There's no mistake, Jonas."

"Seeing is believing."

"I've seen him."

"In New York?"

Sam fell back apace.

"It's on the dead square, Jonas?" he cried, cautiously.

"It's as solemn as solemn can be. I betray no one."

"He's the very image of Harlan Hope. If the old lawyer were alive, and you

would place the two men together, you couldn't tell Eric from Marvin."

"It's wonderful. It seems like a dream."

"Does it? I thought it would startle you."

"Is he in New York, Sam?"

"He's where I can lay hands on him within an hour."

"I can hardly believe it, and if the words hadn't tumbled from your tongue hang me if I would!"

"But it's gospel. Just think what a mine we have struck. Why, Jonas, if Marvin Lee were to come forth and proclaim that he was Harlan Hope—that some other man had been killed—why, he would be believed. Think of the sensation it would let loose."

"Astonishing! But we don't want him to do this."

"No. I've got a right to work for myself. I don't care to pull the irons out of the fire for another, and get nothing but burned hands. I'm not built that way, Jonas, old boy."

"Neither am I. But this wonderful discovery. In this city! Marvin Lee! Why hasn't he come forward before this?"

"He must have been afraid to. There's the old crime, you know."

"But it was Eric, or Harlan Hope, who was accused of taking old Manoah's life."

"Let your mind go back a few years, Jonas. Go back to the night of that murder. Some one strangled the old servant. If you recollect right, Jonas, Marvin had been gone three years. No one seemed to know what became of him, and few people cared. You recall the day after the murder, while we scoured the plantation for what we called a trail?"

The eager, listening Jonas nodded.

"Don't you remember the little thing I picked up near the little bayou?"

"It was a watch-guard. I don't think I shall ever forget it. I recall that we—you and I, Sam—decided that it had once belonged to Marvin Lee."

"The missing twin—yes. It belonged to him, and you know how we speculated over the find and at one time half believed that he was on the plantation the night of the murder."

"Yes, yes."

"They hunted Eric for it—didn't they?—and never turned their attention to Marvin at all."

"It was Eric all the time."

"Now, things have reached this pass: Major Nightshade is about to swoop down upon the prize. He has nearly all the strings in his hands. He is going to come out as Marvin Hope, or, rather, as Marvin Lee."

"The deuce he is?" cried Jonas.

"All the cards are in his hand. It's a bold game, and unless we use the discovery I have made, what will prevent his success?"

"It's a bold play."

"No bolder than others he has made. You know the man, Jonas. You know Dandy Finch?"

"Don't I?" and Jonas South's mind seemed to bridge a chasm of years and return to the old Virginia plantation.

"He's cool and calculating," said Sam Cerberus. "I know more about his plans than any living man, for I've been close to him for a long time."

"I know that."

"Vera knows a good deal. Vera is the old Korah who smashed hearts in Virginia."

"And Perley Prince is here, too," put in Jonas.

"Oh," laughed Sam, falling back in the chair. "All the crows are here for the feast. Fate has fetched us together."

"Fate or fortune."

"Well, I trust it's fortune that threw us together. Now the game is for Major Nightshade to come forth with the 'proofs' as Marvin Lee—"

"But where's the proofs?" broke in the listener.

"What's that man and woman been doing all these years?" cried Sam Cerberus.

"Did he kill Harlan Hope?"

The look that overspread Sam's face was startling, and Jonas noticed it.

"That's for the detectives," said he, grinning.

"And they're on the trail! If you know so much about Major Nightshade's plans you must know that they are sifting out this mystery of crime."

"They are," was the reply. "They are looking into the murder mystery of the lawyer's house. It's to be out harvest, Jonas. If you haven't the nerve to step back and hold your tongue."

The taxidermist seemed to reflect a moment.

"I've got the nerve!" cried he, "but just now I've got a terrible mission on my hands."

"What's that?"

"I drew the starred ace at the Major's. I am expected to kill the detective."

"That's all right," was the retort. "We'll make that only an incident on the road to success. Are you with me, Jonas, old boy?"

Sam Cerberus held out his long, slimy hand, and the taxidermist's grasp was answer sufficient to the question.

CHAPTER XIX.

MYSTERY.

"Is he gone, mother?"

"Gone, child."

"Thank Heaven."

"He knew you were here. He heard your voice, and he will come again."

"But he must not find me. He must not drag me into his net. I dare not face that man. I have lied to him and his friends. I cannot face Gideon Gale, the ferret."

The speakers were Iva Guant and her mother, and the scene was the house visited by the Quickstep Detective.

Ruby Hope's maid was pale and trembling, and her mother, traced by the detective from the tenement, watched her with a good deal of interest.

"You saw a good deal that night," said the mother.

"More than I can tell."

"You told them the story about the lean-faced man—the man with the receding forehead?"

"I did."

"They believed it, but you see the note I left behind—the one in which I disabused Miss Ruby's mind—has broken all the force of my first account."

"There's a way out of this," said Mrs. Guant.

"An honorable one, mother?"

"Yes."

"I would to Heaven there were."

"Go to the police—the inspector's office—and make a clean breast of it."

Iva fell back with a sharp cry.

"The last thing I dare think of!" she exclaimed. "I shall never do that."

"Then you prefer to carry the dread secret to the grave and baffle the cause of justice?"

The mother's look was severe.

"I have no choice," said Iva. "I cannot do as I might wish in this matter."

"They've oathbound you, child?"

"I am simply in the toils. I dare not speak."

"Will the time for speaking ever come?"

"I trust it will."

"Then keep the secret. But this man won't give you up."

"I know that. I will be shadowed by Gideon Gale from now on and not a moment's peace of mind will be mine."

"That is true, but you and the detective for it."

This was poor consolation, but the girl had to accept it in lieu of something better.

"You say now that the lean-faced man did not murder Harlan Hope, the lawyer?"

Iva put out her hand as if to close her mother's mouth, but the question was not checked.

"You have no confidence in the world," upbraidingly put in Mrs. Guant.

"All the confidence in the world, mother."

"But you will not—"

"I cannot. There!"

The mother stopped at last, seeing that

nothing could be done with the secret keeper, and Iva left the room.

Five minutes later, when Martha Guant entered the adjoining apartment, a note awaited her on the little dresser.

It was brief and to the point.

It was almost cruel in its wording, and for a moment she appeared on the eve of swooning.

Iva was gone.

She said in the note that she would not come back while the detective hunted her.

The secret must be kept at all hazards, and she was afraid to confront the man-hunter.

She might break down and betray the truth, and she could not do that.

Busy with her new thoughts, Mrs. Guant threw herself upon the bed and wept.

Meantime, as we know, the Quickstep Detective had tracked Ruby Hope, believing her to be Iva, and had heard her ask him in her own home what he was going to do about it.

Therefore, Iva had a clear field for flight.

She might have had ample opportunity to hide again but for the inseparable Terrier, the man who turned up at all times and in odd places.

She slipped from the house after leaving the note on the dresser for her mother, and found no one on her trail.

Gideon Gale had gone off, and she did not think that the Terrier was now the shadow.

This man, eager to see the girl, began at once to trace her, and in a short time he ran her down.

Iva Guant entered a little house near the Bridge and shut the door behind her.

The Terrier merely drew near enough to note the number, and then fell back, keeping up a vigil till late into the night.

"She's nesting there," said he. "I know where to find her when I want her. Gideon can pick her up at any time, now."

With this he made his way to the ferret's office, and, having a key to the door, entered to find no one at home.

The Terrier lay down on the sofa at one side of the room and soon fell asleep.

He had done enough for one night, and Iva, the secret-keeper, had been located.

But he should have watched the house near the Bridge a little longer.

Iva came out again in another dress shortly after his departure.

She flitted away, keeping in the shadows as much as possible, and looking every now and then over her shoulder.

By and by she ran up the steps of the house where Amos Shartle had received his shock.

What did she want there?

She rang the bell and presently the door was opened and she slipped inside.

The man with the iron-gray beard led her to a room alongside the hall and turned on her as he shut the door.

"Sit down," said he.

Iva Guant obeyed, looking at him all the time, and in the chair she seemed to be in fear of his searching eyes.

For half a minute he looked sternly at her, and then leaned forward, saying:

"What is it?"

"I must go."

There was a little start on the man's part.

"I must either surrender the secret or quit the city."

"You have been followed, have you?"

"I am in the shadow, even now. This very night I came within a hair's breadth of falling into the hands of the detective."

"How, girl?"

Iva narrated her adventures, and the person before her listened with almost breathless interest.

"It was a narrow escape, sure enough, but you say you have found another place?"

"I have, but I won't be safe there. I will be hunted down and badgered by this man."

A smile wreathed the half-hidden lips for a second.

"You don't think yourself strong enough to withstand him?"

"I'm afraid of it."

"But it must be kept. Your first story was a good one, but you weakened."

"I had to give some excuse for my sudden flight."

"Yes, but another excuse might have done just as well."

"It was the first one that flashed across my mind."

"Just so. I find no fault with you. Don't understand that I upbraid you, child."

The voice was soft and sympathetic, and Iva bowed her head.

"I want to be true to you," said she.

"Of course you do, and I appreciate it, too."

"When will the time come for me to speak?"

"Perhaps never."

A little cry welled from Iva's throat.

"You don't mean that?" Then her countenance changed. "Very well. I serve you to the end. Understand that."

The gray-beard put out his hand and touched her softly.

"I trust you were not tracked hither?" he said.

"I am quite sure I was not for I was very cautious. The detective must have gone home from mother's house."

"Let us hope so. Iva, the time is coming when all this mystery will be made clear."

"I hope so. It will make me a happy woman again."

"It cannot come too soon for me, but the hand of vengeance must fall first."

"I understand, or think I do."

"Harlan Hope is dead—murdered," and a strange smile came to the speaker's lips. "You know what you saw that night."

"Can I ever forget it?"

Gray-beard arose and paced the room like a man laboring under a storm of excitement.

"Keep the secret," he suddenly cried, coming up to the silent girl, who watched him. "Let them think of you as they will. Let them say that you deliberately lied—even that you were an accomplice."

"They may say what they please," flashed Iva, her cheeks getting back their old color.

"I will stand by you, child. I will stand between you and the public tongue."

"A thousand thanks. I have always been faithful."

"Always. There! Don't think of it any longer."

"I will not."

Gray-beard drew a purse and pushed a lot of bills into Iva's hands.

"Keep away from the detective," said he.

"As I would from a viper," was the reply.

Then, as a thought suddenly entered Iva's mind, she asked, dropping her voice to a whisper:

"Does Miss Ruby—"

Graybeard held up his hand and she stopped.

"Now, good-night, Iva. Be silent under all circumstances. Don't let them get at the secret. If he finds you—if this detective finds you, I say—"

He moved closer to her and finished:

"Outwit him, somehow—I care not how."

"It shall be done. The secret at all hazards."

"Let that be your motto."

Once more Iva Guant was on the street.

The gray-beard had closed the door behind her only to emerge from the house himself and vanish in the direction taken by the maid.

It was past midnight when he dodged into a certain street and watched a light seen at intervals through some blinds.

For ten minutes he stood thus and kept his vigil.

At last a door opened and a man came forth.

It was but a step to him, and gray-beard met him on the sidewalk.

"How is Amos Shartle coming on, now?"

The nurse—it was the lawyer's profes-

sional nurse—stopped and looked at the gray-beard.

"He's living yet, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes; but he's still flighty."

"Hasn't he been able to explain anything yet?"

"Nothing coherently."

"What do the doctors say?"

"There's but little hope, unless he meets with a sudden shock, when his mind may come back to him."

"Thanks," and the stranger walked away, followed by the nurse's eyes until he vanished.

"Till he receives another sudden shock!" repeated gray-beard. "I will see that he gets it, but not to-night. No, not until after I have struck."

CHAPTER XX.

AMOS SHARTLE'S SECOND SHOCK.

The coolness with which Sam Cerberus had told Jonas South that they would make the detective's death an incident on their road to success showed that he was determined to carry out his new scheme at all hazards.

If he had discovered Marvin Lee, the old lawyer's brother, there was a chance for a stake; but to get it he would be compelled to turn against Major Nightshade.

Sam was resolute, and Jonas, perhaps seeing a way out of his predicament, rendered dangerous by the incident of the starred ace, readily accepted the other scheme.

It was the night after the meeting of Sam and Jonas in the latter's workshop that Gideon Gale, the Quickstep Detective, found himself once more at Amos Shartle's bedside.

He had called the night before, but finding the lawyer no better, he had gone away, promising to look in upon him frequently, hoping to find him in a state to look at the packet recovered from Crowley Creepers.

Gideon found the lawyer reclining on the couch, and this time his eyes seemed to have a natural light.

He held out his hand to Gideon the moment the detective entered the room, and the ferret sat down on the edge of the bed.

"It's all come back to me," said Amos, with a smile. "It came in a shock like the fatal one."

"How in a shock, Amos?"

"I was lying here a while ago, with my mind in a whirl, when all at once I thought the door opened yonder and a man came in."

"You are sure you weren't dreaming?"

"Not at all. It seemed as plain as plain could be. I was gazing toward the door, and it opened slowly. The man who seemed to come in had a gray beard—"

"Oh, yes, the traditional graybeard," broke in the detective, smiling.

"The same one I tracked from the office that night."

"What night, Amos?"

"The one when I received the shock. It was as natural as then. I saw the door open and the visitor come in. For a moment I looked at him, and he didn't see me. He advanced to the table yonder and sat down coolly. The nurse was out, and he had everything his own way. Perhaps he knew the state I had been in, for he did not take the least notice of me, but began to write."

Amos Shartle stopped and passed his hand over his face.

"He's not here now," said he, continuing. "He didn't remain long, but what he had written he left behind."

"Where is it?"

The lawyer put one hand beneath the bolster and fished out a bit of paper.

"Here it is."

The Quickstep Detective took the paper and leaned toward the stronger light.

He read as follows:

"To the Nurse: See that this man lacks for nothing, and that he comes out of this state soon. You shall have a thousand dollars if he comes back to himself. The day of vengeance is not far away, and then all will be explained."

There was no signature to this strange bit of writing, and the detective glanced at Amos Shartle.

"It's a singular bit of work," said he.

"It proves that the man I saw was flesh and blood, doesn't it?"

"This was written by a living hand."

"Of course. I permitted the man to escape. I saw him pass from the room, when, with my brain on fire, I sprang out of bed and captured that paper. Then I seemed to lose all consciousness, for the nurse found me lying across the bed in that state."

"Did he see the writing?"

"No. I must have placed it underneath the pillow ere I fainted. You see what the shock has done. I am out of the darkness. I have my mind again, Gideon."

"Then you can go back and explain how you were attacked the first."

Amos Shartle looked for a little while at the detective, and shook his head.

"What! Don't you intend to enlighten me?" exclaimed Gideon.

"Not now."

"Come! Don't you know that you may be able to throw light upon the mystery?"

"I believe I can."

"But you refuse?"

"I cannot."

"Is it because that writing was left on the table? Do you think you know who left it there?"

"I think I do."

"Oh, you had seen the man before?"

"I have."

A curious smile played about the lawyer's lips, and for half a second he looked away.

The detective watched him a while longer, and then rose.

"You are simply clogging the wheels of justice," said he, looking down at Amos.

"I can't help it."

"You propose to keep the secret against the admonitions of your better nature."

"Forgive me, Gideon. I don't want to be stubborn nor to lay a straw in your way, but this thing is too startling for me to tell it now. I might be mistaken. I cannot say."

"Amos," said the ferret, "I can lay my hands on the missing packet."

There was a start and a cry, and the lawyer was on his feet.

"You've found it, have you?"

"I know where it is."

"Then of course you've seen the man with the cold hand?"

"I've seen him, Amos."

"Thank Heaven! Was it sealed as when it came to me?"

"The seal had been broken."

"And the contents of the packet examined?"

"Yes."

"I see," cried Amos, "you don't intend to tell me any more until I have made certain disclosures?"

"Wouldn't that be fair?"

"Where is the packet?"

"In my possession."

"Gideon, it must be secured. It must be put beyond the pale of theft."

"Trust me for that."

Amos Shartle took a long breath.

"Since you say that the seal was broken when you found it, you had a chance to master its contents."

"A splendid opportunity, Amos."

The Quickstep Detective spoke with a good deal of secret triumph.

"What was in it?"

Amos Shartle came nearer, and his hand fell upon the detective's arm.

"A strange story," was the reply.

"About the past?"

"Yes."

"It was Harlan Hope's story of his life, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"Written by him when he believed himself to be in the shadow of death. Gideon, I could startle you."

"I don't know about that, Amos. You are at liberty to try."

But the lawyer seemed to recoil, and for a little time Gideon Gale regarded him in silence.

"I will call again," said the ferret.

"Perhaps the next time you will be more reasonable."

"I fear not. I am all right again. I feel that the shock I received that night was enough to turn my mind. It came like the fall of a thunderbolt."

Amos crossed the room and picked up his hat.

"I am going down to the office."

"At this time of night?"

"Yes."

"You have the key, the only one, and you won't find the place disturbed."

"I'm not so sure of that."

They left the house together, and in a short time both Amos and the detective stood at the door of the Broadway office.

Amos unlocked it.

"It looks like home," said the lawyer, as he entered the place. "I'll turn on the light, Gideon."

He did so as he finished.

"Gods! Look yonder. He has been here!" suddenly cried the lawyer, pointing at the table, and then falling back with the last words on his lips."

"Who's been here?"

"The living dead—the man whom I saw the night of the shock."

In another moment Amos had sprung to the table, and was staring at its burden of papers, which was in confusion.

"Don't you see that some one has been writing here?" he exclaimed. "Here's the ink still wet on the pen and the chair has been pulled up to the edge."

Gideon Gale took up the pen and held it close to the light. The nib glistened.

Surely some one had been there.

He turned to Amos Sharle and remarked:

"If you carry the only key to this door, how came the man here?"

There was no reply, for Amos had picked up a sheet of writing paper and was gazing at it.

He suddenly passed it over to Gideon, saying nothing.

The detective looked at it, and then laid it down.

"It seems to be the memoranda of some law case. The man who left it here must have known something about your business."

The young lawyer stammered and sank into a chair.

"My God! Why not out with all of it," he cried. "The accursed secret will do me no good so long as I keep it. But, give me time."

"Time for what, Amos?"

"Time to think over it. Time to see some one and consult."

"How much time do you want?"

"Give me until to-morrow afternoon."

"It might be too late."

"No, it will not be! I must see some one. Gideon Gale, you have no idea of the depth of this mystery of murder. Detective though you be, you don't know who was murdered."

"Don't know who was killed in Harlan Hope's mansion?" echoed the ferret.

"It is true. You don't know!"

"Why, my dear fellow," and the detective touched the lawyer on the shoulder, "you were at the house with me. You saw and recognized your murdered partner, Harlan Hope."

"I did; that's a fact, Gideon."

"Now you would have me suspect that we have been mistaken all this time."

"I haven't said so."

"No, you haven't, but your talk drifts that way."

Sharle broke from his friend's touch, and, looking at him, with the table partly between them, he exclaimed:

"You have given me till to-morrow, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"That will do. I will be here to-morrow afternoon at two."

"That will do, Amos."

"Remember, don't fail to come."

"And on your part don't fail to keep the engagement. I have read the narrative which the man with the cold hand stole from you. It is important. It almost names the murderer."

These words were met by silence, and

with a parting look at Amos, who had dropped into an armchair at the table, Gideon Gale went out.

"Thinks he's playing a shrewd hand," his thoughts ran, glancing back at the office door. "It will take a better man than you, Amos Sharle, to hoodwink Gid Gale very long."

And with this the ferret went down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STARTLING NARRATIVE.

Startling events were to take place before detective and lawyer should meet again.

Gideon Gale made his way home.

He might have stayed and watched the office for Amos Sharle's exit, but he did not.

Something seemed to urge him to his little room, and there he drew a chair to the table.

He was not to be alone very long.

Footsteps approached the door, and a gentle rap was heard.

Gideon had shot the little bolt when he closed the portal, and, rising, he crossed the room and opened up to his caller.

Ruby Hope stood before him.

The Quickstep Detective, very much surprised, politely welcomed his unexpected visitor.

"A queer time for a call," observed Ruby, her face not as stern as when he saw it last in her own house, when she asked him what he was going to do about her street walk.

She entered and took the chair he profered.

If he had been permitted to say whom of all people he would have seen at that time, his answer would have been Ruby Hope.

The young girl did not wait to be questioned, but spoke at once.

"I am here, in the first place, to beg pardon for my language at home. I was a little hasty. This case is too important to be trifled with. I have come to tell you where I had been before you tracked me home, thinking me Iva."

"Just as you wish. If you consider it important, perhaps it is proper that you should explain."

The ferret spoke in a half-careless, off-hand manner that rather discomfited the girl.

"I was wearing one of Iva's dresses, and that, perhaps, is why you mistook me for her," answered Ruby. "I was called from home by a note which was delivered at our house a short time before I set out upon the venture."

"Oh, you were tolled from home, were you, miss?"

"That seems to be the proper word. I received a note saying that if I didn't mind the streets of New York after dark I might learn something startling by calling at a certain house."

"And you obeyed?"

"At first I did not intend to pay the least attention to the note, but, on second thought, urged on by the mystery which we are so anxious to clear up, I went out."

Gideon made no reply, but waited for the young girl to proceed.

"I am quite familiar with the streets of this city," she went on, after a brief pause. "I thought I did not need a guide to show me where to find the address given in the note, but I got lost—lost in the streets of Gotham, and for some time did not know where I was. I was set right by a policeman to whom I at last appealed, and even then I was not sure of my bearings."

"By dint of hard work, and now and then seeking information, for I was determined to see what there was in the message, I reached the right number. It turned out to be a small house in C-Street, and not a very desirable neighborhood, but, having come that far, I resolved to see it all out, and rang."

"For some time my ring was not responded to, and at last the door opened. I was invited inside by a woman and the door closed on me with a sound like that

of doom. The hall was quite dark, but a hand seized my wrist, and I was escorted to a room, where I was told to wait till some one came in."

"This wait was not a lengthy one, for soon I heard footsteps in the hall, and the door opened. The man who entered the room wore a gray beard, and stopped in the middle of the chamber and looked closely at me. I own that a feeling of uneasiness almost overcame me, and I wished for the first time that I had not ventured. He remained there eyeing me for a full minute, and then approached with a gait which absolutely thrilled me."

"I then understood what Amos once said to me in one of his brief lucid spells about a gray beard and a pair of shining eyes, all of which belonged to the person before me. I kept my seat, though feeling that some evil was about to befall me, and at length the man seated himself at a table which was in the room. By this time the light had been turned on, and I had a good chance to study him. The more I did so, however, the more I was mystified, and I could not help wondering why I had been summoned to meet him."

"His figure reminded me of father's; he seemed to have some of father's movements—notably one of crossing his legs in a manner so peculiar to Harlan Hope."

"All at once he leaned toward me and said, with a faint smile: 'Well, child, are you satisfied?' I told him that I was mystified—that I did not know him, and believed that we had met for the first time. I could not believe that I had ever seen him before."

"I was still speaking when he straightened in the chair and waved his hand. 'What is the detective doing?' he asked. I told him that, as far as I knew, you were on the trail. 'Will he solve the mystery?' was the next question. To this I could make no positive reply, as you must know, and he shook his head. 'There will be no final victory without me!' he exclaimed. I knew not what to say. No final victory without him? It was startling, for I could not conceive how that man had come into the case. It was simply beyond my comprehension, Mr. Gale."

"I wanted to ask him why we could not succeed without him, but hesitated. There was a fear at my heart—a dread of him—and I did not put the query."

"We continued to retain our positions in the room, when, all at once, he left the chair and came over to me. 'Whatever became of your father's brother, Marvin?' he asked. It was a strange and startling question, and one that went through me like a knife. My father's brother, Marvin! Once I found an old letter on the floor of the library, and, my curiosity tempting me to read it, I saw at the bottom the name he had spoken; but there was nothing in the letter to indicate that it had come from my father's brother. I told him that I did not know what had become of Marvin Hope, even if such a personage had ever existed, at which reply he burst into a laugh."

"Let me answer the question, miss," he said, and the next instant, to my astonishment, the gray beard fell to the floor, and there stood before my eyes the living image of Harlan Hope!"

Ruby stopped and seemed to catch her breath.

She was excited, and her face had lost color.

Gotham Gid, remembering what he had heard of a gray beard, waited for her to proceed.

"For some time I did not stir," she went on, after a spell. "I almost believed that I was looking into Harlan Hope's eyes, but you remember that I have followed him to the grave."

"Yes, miss."

"When I had recovered I asked the man if he were Marvin Hope, and he said that he could bear that name if he cared to—that he could deprive me of many of the comforts of life, but that he did not intend to do so."

"He did not explain, Miss Ruby?"

"No; but he rose and opened a cupboard in the room, showing me a lot of

papers which looked a good deal like legal documents. He waved his hand toward these, looking at me over his shoulder, and said: "I must do something miss. How's Amos Shartle coming on?" This interjection of Amos Shartle into the strange interview startled me not a little, but I managed to tell him of the lawyer's condition. 'He'll come out of it,' he smiled. 'Amos will get back his mind, and after the day of vengeance there may be many happy hours for him.'

"He told you this—the gray-beard did, eh?"

"I remember his exact language. I recall how he looked at me, and how more than once I wondered, if, after all, Harlan Hope was not living in him! When he assured me that he did not intend to demand what he called 'Marvin Lee's rights,' he dismissed me, saying abruptly that the interview was at an end, and that I could go. But I did not care to go. I had seen just enough to urge me to the end. I wanted to know about his remaining unknown, and why my father had never seen him.

"I was pushed to the door. I felt his hand at my wrist as I was forcibly escorted from the room, but, once out in the hall, he leaned forward and kissed me! Then it was that I tore myself from his grasp, and the next moment, with my cheeks burning, I found myself on the steps, and the door was shut."

Such was Miss Ruby's astonishing story. Gideon Gale had not let a single word escape him.

It was, indeed, a singular narrative—a strange tale to have fallen from the lips of the young girl.

"I could not rest until I made up my mind to tell it all to you. I might have told it at home, but, finding that you had tracked me, that you had dogged my steps on the streets—though now I forgive you for it—I resented your inquiries and replied as I did."

"Where is this house?" asked Gideon Gale.

"Ha! You would go to it?"

"Perhaps."

"Was there a Marvin Hope?"

"There was."

"My father's brother?"

"The same."

"It seems like a dream. It seems incomprehensible. He must have been a twin brother."

"He was."

"You have discovered this, then? You have not been idle. I will not ask you how you made the discovery, for that is in the line of your profession. Now, Gideon Gale, I have a theory concerning Amos Shartle's condition."

"Well?"

"He must have encountered this man—this Marvin Hope. He must have been brought face to face with him when the graybeard no longer hid his features. There may have been a sudden unmasking, and that, with the startling resemblance, may have given Amos the terrible shock. I have thought of this many times since my adventure."

"It is quite plausible," assented the detective. "Amos Shartle may have seen this same person."

"It is the only theory I can form," was the reply. "No wonder he came home dazed. It was like one rising from the dead. It was startling enough to frighten the very life out of him."

"Is the likeness so very striking, miss?"

"It is complete. Were Marvin Hope to walk the streets of New York he would amaze everybody who knew Harlan Hope. You cannot imagine the fidelity of the likeness. He has my father's build, his eye and his voice. There is nothing lacking."

"Why does he not unmask himself?"

"I cannot say. He seems to know all about the murder at the house. He talks of revenge, and says that when he comes forth in his true garb the mystery will be solved. His anxiety about Amos Shartle seemed born of affection, but it is certain that he never knew the man. Father loved him."

The Quickstep Detective did not seem to take particular notice of the girl's last words, for he looked away and let her proceed.

"I believe that the solution of the murder mystery is in that man's hands. You did not find Iva? You failed to run to earth the maid who told her story and then recanted, to vanish like a sunbeam. Perhaps we might let Iva go for a time and turn our attention to Marvin Hope. He must know a great deal. Perhaps my father's past may have a good deal to do with the mystery and its solution?"

"It has," confessed Gideon, lowering his voice.

"Let everything be sifted out. I will not rest under a cloud. I want everything as clear as the summer sky."

These were Ruby Hope's last words as she took her departure.

Gotham Gid went back to the little chair in the office.

He took from a locked drawer a packet which he opened and over which he remained motionless some time.

The contents of the packet were no secret to him now.

He had read it before, but now, in the light of Ruby's revelation, he went carefully over certain pages of the closely written manuscript—Harlan Hope's handwriting.

"I'll follow this new trail," he decided, as he returned the packet to its place. "I have the clew to gray-beard's whereabouts; I know where to find the man who frightened Amos Shartle. I think I can lay my hand on the missing link, and after that the solution of the murder mystery will be plain sailing. That man knows who did the killing in the old lawyer's house."

The Quickstep Detective, at that very moment, was himself in the shadow.

CHAPTER XXII.

OLD CHOLLY'S MISHAP.

"That man knows who did the killing in the old lawyer's house."

Such was Gideon Gale's conclusion about the man who had summoned Ruby to his presence to proclaim himself Marvin Lee, or, as she called him, Marvin Hope.

Thus, by degrees, without worming the secret from Amos Shartle, the story of his shock was slowly coming out.

Had he not seen this man as well?

If he had not been confronted by the person with the gray-beard, which was but a mask, whom, then, had he seen?

The Quickstep Detective resolved to let no grass grow under his feet in pursuit of the solution to the mystery.

He did not remain indoors very long after Ruby Hope's departure.

Once more on the street, he flitted hither and thither, but always with one purpose in view.

To find Marvin Hope was now his quest.

To stand face to face with this man, who had shown himself to Ruby, if not to Amos Shartle, was his desire.

"If Marvin Hope, how did he know some secrets which must have belonged to the old lawyer alone? If Marvin Hope, why had he not revealed his identity before?"

But the Quickstep Detective was asking, not answering such queries, as he pursued his way.

He found the house.

He came up to the little place where Ruby's adventure had happened, and looked at the closed and silent door.

It revealed nothing.

The girl had told him that a woman had opened the portal to her.

Would she perform the same office for him?

The detective rang, and the footsteps came toward the portal.

It opened to show him a face, but he was not invited in.

Instead, the woman, a full-faced person of past forty, waited for him to speak.

"Is the gentleman of the house at home?" asked Gideon.

"There is no one in this house but myself, and I am the Widow Shell."

"But your boarder or lodger?"

"I have none."

She was curt, but not insolent.

The detective looked into the black eyes and saw determination there.

He was to be baffled; this was plain.

"I have called by request to see the gray-bearded gentleman in the house."

"I'm sorry, but I have no lodger. You may have mistaken the house, sir."

The Quickstep Detective was quite sure he had not. He was sure he had come to the right place.

"If you will come in I will convince you," said the woman, and as she held the door open for him, he walked inside.

She was all smiles and cleverness now. She showed him all the rooms in the place.

Not one showed that they had ever been inhabited by a man.

Had Ruby given him the wrong address?

Impossible! the girl had no intention of deceiving him; she could not have thrown him off the trail.

In one of the rooms the detective discovered a scrap of paper lying on the table.

He swept it toward him and concealed it in his hand, and when he told Mrs. Shell that he must have been directed to the wrong place, and was on the sidewalk once more, he looked at his find.

It was a scrap of envelope, with only the post-mark visible.

Gideon Gale had to beat down his chagrin, but this was not hard to do, for no one was watching him.

Marvin Lee had taken flight.

The quarry had been flushed and was out of sight.

Perhaps he mistrusted the girl, and was not ready to be revealed in his true colors.

As the detective turned from the house he might have caught sight of a shadow that moved after him.

It was the figure of a man, and the step was almost noiseless.

The detective pursued his way, and at last turned up at home again.

The Terrier met him as he opened the door.

"How long have you been here?" asked Gideon.

"Thirty minutes."

"Alone all the time?"

"No. Old Cholly just went away. He dropped in to see you, but could not wait."

"What did the old man want?" asked Gideon.

"He had a bit of news."

"Important news, Peter?"

"It may be. He thinks he ran across a ghost to-night, and hastened to tell you."

"Whose ghost?"

"Dandy Finch's," was the reply. "Old Cholly ran across the man on the street, but lost him."

"Where did Cholly go?"

"You will find him taking a little airing on the Battery."

"Watch the room, Peter."

"You're going to find Cholly, eh?"

"I am."

"Be careful. Twice since I came here I heard some one in the hall out there."

"But no one came to the door?"

"Not quite to the door. First I would hear the steps, and then I wouldn't. At first they sounded like a woman's, and at last they seemed more like the steps of a man, but careful and eager. Old Cholly seemed to chase them off."

The detective said no more, but went out.

Old Cholly had seen a ghost!

He had sighted Dandy Finch, now known to the ferret as Major Nightshade, and he wanted to know more about the encounter.

Not long after he might have been seen under the lights in Battery Park and was making his way toward old Cholly's favorite place.

He was there on his bench.

But the old man was not alone, for alongside of him reposed a little bundle of humanity that seemed to have rolled itself up like an opossum.

The detective drew near the bench.

but in a manner so as not to disturb the pair.

Old Cholly was looking at his companion, whose keen eyes regarded him with burning interest.

"I didn't expect to find you, I say," said the old fellow's companion.

"I suppose not."

"You live all alone, don't you?"

"Perhaps. What's the use of a man like me burdening myself with a wife?"

"Eh? You had one once. Don't you recollect the old plantation where you married her?"

"Hush! You can't talk about that woman in my presence!" broke in Cholly. "Her name never passes my lips, and you can't speak of her in my hearing."

"But you loved her, didn't you?"

"You mean reptile, hush, I say! I'll strangle you if you don't. I won't have it."

At that moment the half-hidden detective caught sight of the little man's face, and he saw that it was flushed with malignance.

He seemed to take delight in irritating the old man.

As old Cholly finished the other shifted his position a little and said:

"Whether you care to talk about her or not, I intend to. You can't close my mouth, you old park cricket."

Old Cholly shrank from the envenomed lips of the speaker and raised his hand, but as suddenly dropped it.

"Strike, if you want to!" cried the other, suddenly sitting bolt upright. "I want to tell you what I can do. They can take a man for a crime fifty years afterward. Time cuts no figure in it at all. You know me."

There was no answer.

"Who are you serving now? Dandy Finch?"

"No."

"You lie!"

It was direct, and the old man winced.

"I say you lie. You are in his employ, for you are under obligations."

"To that man?"

"To Dandy Finch."

"I'd sooner lose a hand than to be under obligations to him. I know the man."

"So do I. He's in the city."

"Do you know that?"

"I do, and so do you. Where is he?"

"I can't tell you."

"Ha! you don't intend to betray him. You intend to stand by him and you're in his pay. I've turned up after long years, and I want my share of the hush money."

"I've never got mine, yet!" grinned old Cholly.

"You're getting it every day, you are. I want to know where he is. I give you a minute."

The little man darted forward and held Cholly fast.

"Don't imagine that because we're in a public park you can twist out of my hands. I have turned man-hunter. I want my share of 'the silent fund.' I intend to have it. I came to New York too late to play my hand against Harlan Hope, as they called him. Some one killed him, too quick for me, curse them! That would have been a fertile field, and I dare say you've plowed it."

"What's that?"

"You've plucked him as well, no doubt."

"He was innocent. He never touched the old servant."

There was resentment in Cholly's eyes, but it did not frighten the other.

"I'll have to be content with Dandy Finch this time," he went on. "What's his name now? Of course he's not Dandy Finch any more."

The old man seemed to be measuring his companion. He appeared to size him up while he held his breath and gathered strength for a blow.

"Come! You've got to tell me. No doubt he's rich enough by this time to give us all the money we want. At any rate, I'll pluck the pigeon to my heart's content."

Old Cholly drew back, and all at once jerked from the hand that held his arm.

The little man sprang up with a curse, but the next second the fist of the other struck him squarely in the face.

Old Cholly put into that blow all the strength he could summon to his assistance, and the other reeled away with a half-conscious cry.

"Take that, reptile and defamer!" cried the old man, springing from the bench.

In less than half a second the struck one seemed to recover, for with a curse as he leaped toward Cholly, he drew a revolver and leveled it.

The intended victim was in the light, and afforded a fair target, and the would-be assassin did not hesitate.

"And you take that!" he exclaimed, as the weapon flashed and the figure of old Cholly spun around and around as he threw his hands above his head.

All this was done so quickly that the Quickstep Detective had no time in which to check the tragic drama.

He leaped forward as the old man pitched to the ground, and in another instant he had seized the little man.

The crowd which pushed forward in a moment seemed to completely surround the detective and his prisoner.

Gideon Gale looked in vain for a policeman, to whom he wished to hand his man, so he could turn his attention to old Cholly.

Suddenly his wrist was seized by some one, at the same time the crowd surged nearer, and as the prisoner was wrenched from the ferret's grasp, a policeman made his appearance.

But half a second too late, as usual. The little man had disappeared.

And Gideon Gale had nothing to do but to look after old Cholly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CATCHER CAUGHT.

The man who had had the difficulty with old Cholly was gone, and Gideon turned his full attention to his venerable protege.

It was not very long before Cholly was able to recognize the Quickstep Detective, and it was discovered that the bullet had but winged him, and that in a little time he would be as well as ever.

It was a narrow escape, and one which Cholly appreciated, as he said, with a grin:

"I'm alive yet, to help baffle the gang. I knew that man the moment he plumped down alongside of me on the bench."

"He was from Virginia, eh, Cholly?"

"From Colledge, like the rest of us. You see, Mr. Gideon, we've all drifted to New York for a purpose. That man is the old overseer, Little Silas, we used to call him, cold, crafty and coolheaded. He knows that Harlan Hope, the dead lawyer, was once Eric Lee; he knows, too, that Dandy Finch is here. I saw him tonight—came across him, and there were the old eyes which no disguise can penetrate."

Gideon told Cholly that he had sought him for the purpose of hearing from his own tongue the story of the finding of Dandy Finch, and in a short time the ferret had the narrative.

"Little Silas will play his hand out if he can," said the old man. "He is equipped with more than one secret which Dandy Finch don't want aired, and he will throw his net to catch the golden pigeon."

"Let him proceed. We want to throw a net as well."

The two separated shortly after the scene in the park and old Cholly bade the ferret good-night.

Gideon Gale went home.

The Terrier was still there, but he soon went away, and in a little while the detective himself went out once more.

And once more he was watched.

This time the spy was a man, who pulled his hat over his eyes and the light which fell upon his face did not reveal much of it.

Gideon had lost Marvin Lee, and he did not like it.

There was something about the Widow Shell which rendered him suspicious, and he at last came to the conclusion that he

had been deceived by both the widow and her lodger.

He turned his footsteps toward the same place and reached it without accident.

The spy kept close behind him.

This time the detective did not ring, but stationed himself near the premises and on a spot from which he could see the front of the house.

There was a dim light beyond the blinds, which was not there on his former call, and Gideon watched it with a great deal of interest.

Had Marvin Lee come back?

It was an enigma which did not offer a solution, but this did not discourage the ferret.

He had plenty of time on his hands; he could watch the house till morning.

Shaded by the building where he stood, he kept his eyes riveted on the place for an hour.

At the end of that time the door opened and out came a woman.

It was late for the Widow Shell to promenade, but the ferret let her go.

She vanished down the street, and Gideon went back to his vigil.

A few moments after the woman's exit the light in the front room vanished and the door opened again.

A man wearing a gray beard looked cautiously out.

He took a survey of the neighborhood and seemed to be satisfied, for he shut the door again, but did not lock it.

Undoubtedly he was alone in the house.

The Quickstep Detective neared the place and listened at one of the windows.

He heard some one inside, and then he mounted the steps.

Should he ring, or should he open the door and startle the man inside?

He resolved upon the latter.

In another moment he had opened the door and was in a darkened hallway.

Not a sound came to his ears, and as he glided forward, feeling his way down the corridor, his trained ears were on the alert.

Suddenly a door opened in the darkness.

Gideon Gale held his breath and stopped.

In another instant there was the noise of swift feet at the other end of the hall, a door squeaked and shut, then all was still once more.

The man was gone.

Gideon, the ferret, ran forward, but brought up suddenly against a closed door.

It was locked.

He had almost found Marvin Lee, as he had Iva on a similar occasion, and the man had been as keen an outwit as the maid.

Confronted by the door, which seemed immovable, the detective was compelled to give up.

He went back and found the door which the man had opened at the beginning of his flight.

The room beyond was dark, but he struck a light and looked around him.

A chair was drawn close to the table, and a number of papers were lying on the cloth.

A pen, the nib of which was still moist, as it had fallen from the stranger's hand, had soiled the tablecloth with a little ink, but nothing remained to identify the runaway.

"Almost in my hand," said the ferret, as he laid the pen down. "I missed him by a hair, but better luck next time."

Satisfied from what he had seen and heard that the hunted man had left the house, the Quickstep Detective went toward the street once more.

The spy was still on guard, as if certain that Gideon would come back some time.

Gideon walked away, and at last pulled up in front of the building in which was situated the law office of Hope & Shartle.

He had left Amos Shartle there.

The young lawyer might be there yet, and Gideon wanted to see him.

The detective ascended to the floor upon which the office was situated, and reached the door.

The tracker, who was proving as good

a trailer as he himself, had come up the steps without noise.

To do this, he had drawn his shoes on the steps, and in his stocking feet he was gliding down the corridor with eyes fixed upon his quarry.

All at once Gideon Gale felt himself forced against the wall alongside the door, and, turning, saw that a man held him there.

It was more like the spring of a tiger than anything else, and the detective was deprived of all resistance by the hands and arms of his assailant.

It was a long, lean face which the ferret saw.

The arms seemed unusually long and the forehead, as the hat had been thrown back, was receding.

"Why didn't you open the door?" asked the detective's enemy.

"I haven't the key."

"Oh, you don't carry keys to every door you visit, then?"

"I do not."

"I'll open it."

The speaker turned to the door and suddenly shot a key into the lock and turned it.

The door of the law office flew open and the interior of the tenantless place stood revealed.

"Go in, Gideon Gale, I want to talk with you."

The detective, still in the clutches of the lean-faced man, crossed the threshold.

"That's right. Now sit down—in his chair, please."

Down into Harlan Hope's armchair plumped the ferret of New York and looked at the man who had turned on the light.

"You're bound to give us trouble," said the stranger. "You don't care to see a fellow-man thrive, but it seems to be your business to tighten on every throat that don't suit you in color."

"You know what my calling is," answered Gideon. "You know me, so there's no need of my telling you that I am one of the inspector's detectives."

"No need under the sun," smiled the other. "I have been tracking you. I have at last had the satisfaction of running you down, though I didn't expect to land you here. This is the old office—the place where the two sharks worked."

"This is the office of Hope * Shartle, the lawyers."

"The dead and the living, eh?"

"Yes."

The detective's assailant had not taken a seat, but stood against the edge of the table, looking down into the cool face of the man of many trails.

"You don't appear to think that you are near the end of your game," he suddenly said.

"I haven't thought about that."

"You haven't, eh? You don't fear me?"

"I know that you have assailed me, but why I cannot conceive."

"Just as if I would assail a man of your calling and engaged as you are now for nothing."

"There must be a meaning to your methods."

"A deadly meaning, Gideon Gale. You are in our road."

"In your road? How so?"

"Your cunning has been pitted against our success. You are one of the obstacles on the road to victory."

"I see. I have given you trouble. Then your calling cannot be entirely legitimate."

"It is not. I'll admit that, seeing that it will go no further than this room. I am not in the most honest of schemes just now. I have followed you to remove the obstacle that irritates us."

There was no reply.

Gideon Gale looked at the man and saw the eyes get a dangerous gleam.

"Listen to me, Gideon. You have played more than one bold hand and won. You have trailed more men down—so they tell me—than any other man of your calling. The last trail is the one that has puzzled you. You don't know who killed the old man in Harlan Hope's house. You are now trying to lift the curtain of mys-

tery which conceals the crime. Am I not right, Gideon?"

"Since you know, why answer?" responded the ferret. "You know what trail I am on."

"I may know more about that trail than you suspect. To be plain with you, it is my business to know what you do, how near you get to the end, what threads you pick up, and the progress you make."

"I don't doubt that," coolly responded the man of clews.

"This being the case, and as I have caught you, you don't expect to be permitted to walk back to that trail and dash us?"

There was no reply to this, and the lean-faced man moved from the table.

Suddenly he pounced upon the detective and dashed him to the floor.

It was a blow which no one could resist, and for which the Quickstep Detective could not prepare.

Both Gideon and the armchair went to the floor together, and the enemy fell upon the spotter.

"There is nothing like making the way clear," was hissed in his ear. "There's nothing like feathering one's double nest without some trail-hawk to destroy it."

Darkness came over the detective's senses.

He felt a hand fall more than once upon him, and then he seemed to pass beyond the boundaries of the material world.

He still lay on the floor when he opened his eyes, and, putting out his hand, found the chair.

It had been righted, and stood near the table.

The ferret was weak; he felt that something had undermined his strength, that he had been beaten down by some nerve-destroying power.

He pulled himself toward the table by catching hold of the chair; then he felt up and found the electric globe and flooded the office with light.

As the soft gleams spread over the cloth Gideon was startled to behold a large scrawl on a piece of paper which had been placed where it would be at once seen.

He read with bated breath: "This man went too far. So will fare all who follow in his footsteps," and then as a sudden faintness overcame him, he clutched at space, to fall back into the chair.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NIGHTSHADE TURNS Nighthawk.

The night had passed when the Quickstep Detective came out of his long period of darkness, and he saw the light of another day in the office.

There was blood on his clothes, and he did not hesitate to call it his own.

The man who had assailed him with such fury the night before had missed killing his man, thanks to a preserving fate, and after some time spent in reflection the detective prepared to quit the place.

The sheet of paper upon which he had read the startling sentences still lay on the table, and now he picked it up.

The words stood out in large, bold characters, as if some illiterate person had produced them, and the longer he looked at them the more he became convinced that he could find the man.

Not wishing to be seen emerging from the office, the door of which the departing man-tiger had left unlocked, the detective left the scene of his last adventure and went down to the street.

He would have to come back at two in the afternoon to meet Amos Shartle, and he expected to have his hands full till that hour.

At home he found that the knife wielded by the lean-faced man had inflicted wounds which had been rendered harmless by an inside pocketbook, though the flow of blood had weakened him a great deal at the time.

Meantime Major Nightshade had entered his house from the street, and had barely closed the parlor door when the woman followed.

"I've been waiting for you," said she, at once.

"Did you get the starred dice?" he abruptly demanded.

"I did not."

"Jonas got it, then."

"Unless it fell to your lot."

A smile for a moment changed the ugly look in the Major's eyes.

"Jonas got it!" he exclaimed. "Now, what will he do? Think you he will shrink?"

"I don't think he will. But," and Vera leaned toward him, "I have made a discovery. I know what has become of the maid, Iva Guant!"

The Major was all attention.

"You know what she told at the inquest and how the newspapers commented on her evidence," Vera went on.

"I remember. She left the house the day after the affair up there."

"Ran off," supplemented the woman. "Well, she afterward recanted—that is, she left behind her a note saying that she had not told the truth about the homicide, but had lied for a purpose."

"Who says this?"

"I do. How I managed to find this out need not be told here, but I know it. They are looking for her now. She is the person most sought by Gideon Gale, the detective."

Major Nightshade remained silent for a moment.

"Then you have done us a service. Does the girl hide from them all?"

"Yes. Not for the world would she have the detective find her."

"What made her recant?"

"I haven't discovered that, but I could find out, perhaps, with a little cleverness. I might call on Ruby."

"You? You cross the threshold of that house?" demanded Nightshade.

"Why not, if I play my hand well and avoid detection?"

"If I thought you could play the hand successfully I would send you to the house," he declared, earnestly. "I must know why the girl told another story."

"Visiting the maid herself might do just as well," she suggested.

"A good suggestion! Where is she?"

"She is living with her mother."

"The address—quick!" looking at his watch. "I'll see her before morning."

"A night visit might alarm the bird."

"I'll attend to that."

Vera gave the address, at which a smile came to his lips.

Proceeding to the sideboard, then, Nightshade poured out a drink of wine, and holding the glass above his head, gave the toast:

"Here's to the nest we feather! Here's victory for us and death to all our foes!"

Vera waved her hand toward him as in glee, and the wine vanished.

Major Nightshade came toward her, and, catching her by the shoulders, seemed to touch her forehead with his lips.

"We've been preparing for the cast a long time, eh, woman?" he exclaimed. "This is better than the old days in Virginia when we had to look up to that young blood who went off under a cloud, and who dared not afterward assume the name his father gave him. I say, this is better than living under one's thumb when one cannot be what he would be, and—"

"The noise in the hall! Some one is there!"

The Major darted toward the hall, throwing open the door and looking into the narrow space, a revolver in his hand.

"No one here," he said, coming back. "You're nervous, Vera!"

Vera said nothing, but there had settled over her face a whiteness which was striking.

"Now for Iva. I'll see this runaway myself. There's no telling what the girl saw that night."

His footsteps died away on the pavement outside, and Vera looked for a little while as if she would like to have followed him.

"What if he does find her?" she said to herself. "What will she say to him? Won't she seal her lips and deny the whole thing? If she does that there'll be a scene. But he knows how to keep his head and to manage her."

Down on the street Nightshade hastened, and he at length reached the quiet house indicated by the address, to find the curtains drawn and the shutters tightly closed, and within and without the silence of the grave seemed to reign.

He approached stealthily.

There was some one beyond the door, and it was not yet daylight.

"I'll write every other day, at least," said a voice, which sounded like a woman's.

"Do. Don't let him find you if you are so determined to keep the secret."

"I'll attend to that, mother. It is time to go."

Then came to the listener's ears sounds of sobbing, and a kiss was heard.

He drew away, and moved to a cover near, with a devilish smile on his face.

He had found the house just in time.

Presently the door opened, and a veiled figure came out upon the steps.

Major Nightshade saw two women embrace, and quickly separate, while one came down and moved away.

"Just in the nick of time, my bird," he gasped. "You are going away to avoid the detective. You are to keep the secret at all hazards, which means, that, if cornered, it can be scared out of you. Which way? Toward the ferries? Here we go, my dear!"

The veiled woman was followed—shadowed to the steps of the Bridge.

He saw her mount them, and gain the footwalk.

"Over the river? We'll see about that! Why not overtake her in the middle of the Bridge?"

He quickened his gait, gliding forward noiselessly.

Iva—for she it was—had reached the center of the great span, and was pushing Brooklynward with all speed, when he clutched the girl's sleeve and she turned and saw him.

There was a cry and a bound, and the next moment the figure of the fugitive was flying across the river!

The fair quarry had slipped through his hands!

The hawk had lost his prey!

CHAPTER XXV.

AMOS SHARTLE ON THE RACK.

The Quickstep Detective kept his engagement with Amos Shartle, and at the appointed hour was carried to the upper floor by the elevator to find the lawyer awaiting him.

Shartle had not slept much the previous night, and his voice quavered when he addressed the ferret.

They proceeded to business at once, and Amos related the story of his accident. He described with a good deal of vividness the encounter with the gray-beard, first saying how he had surprised the same man in the office before, and believed that he was looking for the packet which the man with the cold hand had purloined.

"There," said Amos, falling back in the chair and looking at the detective. "You have the story, or confession—call it what you will. I have kept nothing back."

"Nothing? You forget that you haven't told the name of the person whom you met."

"Why need I name him? These very walls may have ears, and I would not state my suspicions aloud for the world."

"But you have heard that Harlan Hope had a twin brother?"

"It has been intimated to me—since the murder."

"And you remember that when we saw the body in the house you were startled to find that the tip of one of the thumbs was missing."

"I distinctly recall that."

"Now, do you know for certain that Harlan Hope had no part of his hands missing?"

"I told you at the time that I did not think he was so maimed."

The detective nodded.

"Amos," and the face of Gideon Gale moved toward the lawyer. "You must try to conceal nothing in this affair. You are under suspicion yourself."

There was a sudden start.

"I under suspicion?" he gasped.

"Yes. You may not have seen a very adroit article which appeared in the press shortly after the murder. It was ably written, and so worded as to direct the public eye toward you."

"My God! Some atrocious enemy must have tried to blast my career."

"Whatever the writer of that article tried to do, he suggested something new to the police. Even now you are under espionage."

"You must help me out of it!" cried Amos. "As I sit before you, Gideon, I am as guiltless of Harlan Hope's death as is the child unborn."

There was no reply.

"You don't suspect me. I know that. You can't do that terrible thing. Why, I wasn't in the house that fatal night, and, if the dead could speak, I would be completely exonerated! Suspected of murder, and in the house of Ruby Hope? It is terrible!"

"You love the girl, Amos?"

For an instant a deepening flush chased every vestige of pallor from the lawyer's face, and he gasped for air.

"I worship her," he said at last. "Though I have never approached her with a declaration of love, I feel that I would not be repulsed. I dare not think of it now. I am ruined!"

"You must fight these things with a better heart than that," replied the ferret. "You must detail to the world every movement of yours the night of the tenth."

"I can do that. Let me see. I—"

Amos stopped and suddenly lost color again.

"I will not tell everything. I cannot. There must be a little break in the chain," and Amos trembled violently with the agitation of fear and distress.

"There," said the detective, coolly. "Don't give way like this. I have not said that I believe you guilty. It is my duty to ferret out the mystery—to bring to light that which is dark, and to reach the end of the trail. You say the face which threw you into that almost deathly state was the counterpart of Harlan Hope's."

"It was. Not only the counterpart, but it was Harlan's real face!"

"You don't believe that, Amos?"

"Well," said the lawyer, softening his voice, "if it was not his face, it belonged to that handy twin brother who seems to have come into the game. But, in the name of God, how could the brother know that there was under this floor a treasure box to which he (Harlan Hope) had sent the documents which the man with the cold hand filched from me? I say how could he have entered this office, which was locked, without the right key? I held one key, and Harlan Hope the other."

"There is something in that," responded the detective. "You left the doorstep believing when the beard fell that you had seen the dead. You did not think of a double at that time."

"I did not. It was the last thing I would have thought of. I saw the face, the eyes, the figure of Harlan Hope! I heard the voice of my murdered partner."

"You did not look at the hands?"

"I did not think of that."

"You simply fell back terrified and went home, you know not how?"

"That's it," smiled Amos. "I went home in a maze, and you know what followed."

"You have not seen him since?"

"I have not."

Amos Shartle settled back like a witness pleased with the fact that the inquisition of questions had ended.

"Now," said the detective, "I want you to go over this story."

He placed upon the table the packet with the seals broken, and looked at the lawyer.

"If this is the packet which came from Harlan Hope's hands to me by Ruby that afternoon I would be mistreating the girl to read it if it is a story of crime."

"It is a story of crime."

"Then I cannot—"

"Read it. It places no stain upon the name of the fair one whom you love. It is the straightforward story of a man who bore the brand of guilt when innocent, for I believe that Harlan Hope never strangled the old servant."

The lawyer came back to the papers with a slight tremor, and began to read.

"It will take you perhaps twenty minutes to go through them," remarked the detective. "I will be back at the end of that time. You will then be ready to give me your opinion."

Already deeply engrossed in the narrative which he saw was in his partner's chirography, Lawyer Shartle nodded, and Gotham Gid slipped from the room.

He went direct to his office, but a few blocks away, and opened the door.

Peter, the Terrier, was on guard.

"There's work for you," he said to this man. "You will come with me."

The Terrier sprang up, but caught the detective by the wrist.

"And I have work for you, sir," he exclaimed. "This time I have located Iva Guant. The girl is a fugitive again. She is in Brooklyn, sir. Saw her come off the Bridge last night. Almost ran against her, but turned and tracked her down. She is hidden this time. You wanted her, didn't you?"

"You know I want her yet, Peter; but, let her rest a while. There are other things to be done, and on this side the river."

The Terrier was all attention, and waited for instructions.

"Amos Shartle is just now reading a very important paper in his office. He will quit the office by and by. I want to know where he goes."

"Yes, sir."

"I am going back to Amos. You will take station where you can witness his exit from the building. Keep your eyes open."

"And you?"

"I can not follow him, being with him in the office while he reads. I may leave it ahead of him, but you must track the lawyer to his destination."

Detective Gale went back, and reached the office in time to see Amos place the last sheet of the remarkable story on the table.

His face was almost white, and his eyes seemed to have sunk deeper into his head.

"It's all plain to me now," averred Amos, at sight of the Quickstep Detective. "The enemy came back. The old crime of the plantation returned to plague Harlan Hope. He may have been blackmailed, though there is no proof of it in the narrative; but, anyhow, he was in the shadow—he feared a man whom he called Major Nightshade."

"That is correct."

"Major Nightshade must have been the Dandy Finch of the plantation—the man whom Harlan Hope, then Eric Lee, beat in love."

"Yes, the same."

"Then, between two persons lies the murder at my partner's house. I don't know what you think of it, Gideon. My theory may be wrong, but I see nothing but the work of Dandy Finch."

"But if your story is correct—if the face that threw you into a spell was the face—"

"There! Don't go back to that. I must have been mistaken. This mysterious twin brother comes between. I must have seen his face. The remarkable resemblance was enough to frighten me, worked up as I had been by the scene in this office, and from which I had tracked him. Yes, after reading that narrative I charge Dandy Finch of murder in the first degree."

Gotham Gid merely pulled the papers toward him, and said:

"The man who came for the shark tooth found in the library could not have been Dandy Finch, from the description of him in that narrative."

"I'll admit that, but he may not have been the murderer. You remember that Iva Guant retracted her first statement, in which a lean-faced assassin figured?"

"I recall that, Amos. Nevertheless, there is a lean and hungry villain in the game. I felt his hand last night. I had my blood drawn by his dagger."

"I see but the one way—to wring from Iva Guant a true statement. The girl knows."

"What if she seals her lips when caught?"

"Pry them open, curse her!" cried Amos, and the next moment he was preparing to quit the office.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A VALUABLE SECRET.

Major Nightshade, after his discomfiture on the Bridge, returned to the city and proceeded at once to his dwelling.

He had almost captured the maid.

He had even felt the girl's sleeve, but with the speed of a gazelle, she had distanced him.

He knew it was no use to pursue her across the Bridge, as the chase would attract undue attention, and so he came back, not a little chagrined.

He had said to himself that he would get her the next time he went after her, and this was the best he could do.

When he entered the main room, where he had left the light burning, he found a visitor in the armchair, complacently smoking.

It was Sam Cerberus, and he looked up at the somewhat surprised Major with a smile.

"When did you come in?" demanded Nightshade, abruptly.

"Half an hour ago, and, not finding you at home, I concluded to wait a while."

Nightshade passed to the sideboard and helped himself before he spoke again.

Sam could see that the man had been out. Everything indicated that the Major had not met with very good success, and when he closed the little closet door, the other observed:

"By the way, there seems to be a little stir among the police."

"A little stir, eh? What do they think now?"

"They're actually watching Lawyer Shartle?"

"They've got the fellow in the toils, have they?" and a smile came to the Major's face and lingered there. "They think they have a clew in him?"

"It looks that way. I've seen the dogs on guard. They have been keeping track of him for two days."

"He will know what it is to be dogged from pillar to post," averred Nightshade. "This man, who has been living well on expectations, will discover just what it means to have a pack of sleuthhounds at his heels. I don't pity him."

The voice was hard and cold, and Sam Cerberus looked at the speaker without speaking.

"What's the cue?" asked the Major. "What have they against the counsellor, or didn't they let you in on the ground floor?"

"In the first place, I don't belong to the police force of New York; and, secondly, if I should ask one of the trackers for his reasons, perhaps I would not be accommodated."

"You know, of course, that this detective, Gideon Gale, is still on the trail?"

A strange light seemed to take possession of Sam's eyes.

"Pardon me, but I don't know anything of the kind."

"Heavens! man, you know that the case fell to him—that he was the first detective on the ground, and that he stepped from the house to the hunt."

"Granted," and Sam blew a ring of smoke ceilingward.

"Well, since then he has been persistent on the trail. Is he one of these who suspect Shartle?"

"Really, I can't say. I didn't get the starred ace, but I am liable to show my hand against the ferret, all the same."

"That's right. I don't know which one of us drew the commission, but it will be done."

"Vera didn't get it."

"I suspect not from what I know; and if it fell to Jonas—"

Sam Cerberus leaned forward a little—and looked the Major squarely in the face.

"It fell to Jonas—the last man who should have drawn it."

"Why?"

"Come," cried Sam. "You know Jonas of old. You know that he never carried out a scheme, nor gained a point, without having a hand to guide him."

"Perhaps not, but this time he is in the shadow, as are some of the rest of us."

"Jonas South is afraid of a woman, and he won't strike the detective."

"The coward!" cried Major Nightshade. "I wish the starred ace had fallen to you."

"That's right; push me forward with the cord or the knife. You want me to get at the detective, and perhaps land behind the bars."

"Not that. You would never fail. I know that. You have never failed me."

"Only when I called on Harlan Hope and failed to see the steel safe in the room."

"That's past, Sam," laughed the other. "I've forgotten that, and don't remember it against you."

"Thanks," mockingly returned Cerberus. "But, Major, I would like to have a hundred."

"You want to play the tiger, I suppose."

"What if I do?" snarled Sam. "I want a hundred dollars."

Nightshade drew his pocketbook, and began to count out the bills.

"You didn't catch her a while ago?" queried Sam.

The fingers grew still, in an instant.

"What do you mean?"

"I say, you didn't catch her on the Bridge."

The two men's eyes met, and for a moment each one seemed to be ferreting out his companion's thoughts.

"You saw her, too, did you?" asked the Major, at last.

"Perhaps. I couldn't miss seeing some things to-night. Why didn't you catch her at the foot of the stairs?"

"I thought the Bridge would be the better place."

"And missed her?"

"Yes. I had my hand on her, but she slipped away like a bird."

"It served you right. You got just what you deserved. Didn't you know that you want nothing to do with Iva Guant?"

"I want the secret she's been keeping."

"Fool!" cried Sam, leaning toward the other, who had turned to the count again. "Did you think she would tell you?"

"I intended to wrench it from her."

"And if the girl had refused, what?"

"She would have gone down into the water below!"

"That is, if no cop had interfered."

"I didn't see any at hand, and it would have been over in the twinkling of an eye. I wanted that secret, and I would have had it or her death. But, here's your hundred."

The money was tossed upon the table, and the emissary clutched it, as with the talons of an eagle.

"What next?" he demanded.

"The final play."

"When will that take place?"

"To-morrow. I have everything ready."

"All points guarded, eh?"

"Every one."

"You will appear on the surface as Marvin Lee, eh?"

"Yes. I cease to be Major Nightshade, and thereafter I will be the missing brother of Harlan Hope."

"It will require nerve. You will have the trail-dogs to baffle you, if they can, and the girl, Ruby, won't give up quietly, with Lawyer Shartle to counsel her."

"His hands are tied now. That man dare not open his mouth, for, at the first squeak, he will find the detectives down upon him, sent thither by a clew that will crush him."

"It looks encouraging," asserted Sam. "It will stir up the city, anyhow."

"New York needs a sensation, and I opine I am the man to provide it."

Major Nightshade selected a cigar from the open box on the table and lit it quietly.

"At about what hour can I congratulate you as Marvin Hope?"

"Say about three in the afternoon."

"A little late for the afternoon newspapers; but then there are second and third editions, and you will appear in one of these."

"That's the idea. But you must help Jonas. If he weakens you must come to the rescue."

"I didn't draw the starred dice, consequently the mission didn't fall to me."

"True, but what concerns me concerns you as well," spoke the other quickly. "We are all in the plot. Vera as well as you and I. Iva has gone to another hiding-place. This city got too hot for her, and when we find her she will tell the truth, or never lay a straw in our way."

Sam, pocketing the money, which he had been toying with, arose to depart.

"Major," said he, "what would you pay to obtain, at this minute, the greatest news you have heard since the old lawyer's exit?"

There was a keen gleam in the speaker's eyes, and he stepped forward, holding his cigar jauntily between finger and thumb.

"I hardly understand you," replied Major Nightshade. "If you mean anything about the girl—"

"I don't."

"If you refer to the young lawyer—"

"I don't. I am now thinking about the most dangerous man in the whole game."

"The detective, then?"

"Not he!"

"In the name of Heaven, to whom do you refer?"

"Wasn't there another man once?" and Sam's face glowed with zest. "I remember one Marvin Hope!"

"You mean Marvin Lee," put in the Major. "I am Marvin Lee!"

"Not yet. You are simply Major Nightshade, or, rather, Dandy Finch, of the old plantation."

"That name was lost long ago. I am Marvin Lee from this hour. I am the missing brother—the man who gave them the slip at Colledge, years and years ago—"

"Ran off under a cloud, eh?"

"True. But you know that he was innocent. He could now stand up before the world in his true garb, and walk the streets of New York unmolested. Marvin Lee has now nothing to fear."

"I see. You've fixed it up brilliantly. You've played the hand for all there is in it. You've covered all points. But don't you know that the night the old servant—old Manoah—was killed, Marvin Lee was on the estate?"

"What if he was?"

"He might not be able to prove an alibi."

"Why, man, do you want to throw ice-water on the greatest scheme man ever hatched? Do you want to rob yourself and bring all my plans to naught?"

"Nothing of the kind. I was only speculating. But now, let me come back to my original proposition: What would you give to know where you can lay hands on Marvin Lee?"

Instead of springing up, Major Nightshade sat still, but he seemed to grow into a statue.

"I've given you something to think about, have I?" grinned Cerberus. "Is it worth ten thousand? It's a great secret. Is it worth twenty thousand? Remember there's nothing like it in this world nor the next one!"

"You're joking, Sam."

"Never was more serious in my life. I joke on a subject of this sort? Not much!"

"But you don't mean that Marvin Lee really is alive?"

"I merely asked what you would give to know where he was just now."

"But you're with us. You are to share in the spoils, and they won't be insignificant, either. Alive? This man come upon the scene at this stage of the game?"

"Why not? What actual proofs have you of his death?"

"They're pretty good ones, I think."

They would stand in any court of law—”

“Unless the dead man came forward as living proof that your assumptions were fabrications.”

There was no reply. Major Nightshade was visibly paler and concerned.

“Well,” said Sam, coolly, “I’ll take twenty thousand to tell you where he is, and I’ll take it down!”

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE HAND OF KORAH.

The stare of utter amazement that came from Major Nightshade was proof that he had expected nothing of the kind from his minion.

“That is a new role for you,” he at length remarked. “You must consider that I have no such sum about me, and even if I intended to be blackmailed, I would not submit to it from you, whom I so well understand.”

“Just as you please, sir.”

Sam Cerberus did not unbend.

“You must first furnish proofs that what you say is the truth. You must first show me that you have seen this man.”

“I’ve seen him—the real Marvin Lee, and within the last twenty-four hours, so I can deliver my man. What other proof is required?”

Nightshade thought he heard at that supreme moment footsteps in the adjoining hall.

Perhaps Vera was out there.

“It’s a bigger secret than even that girl can have,” observed Sam. “It’s the boss trump of the game.”

There was no reply.

“You can’t win if this man lives. You will lose everything if he should be unearthed by the human ferrets of New York.”

This forced the Major to his feet.

“You forget,” cried he, “that you are in the same boat with me. If that man comes forward you lose all.”

“But if you know where he is he won’t come forward, eh?”

There was a devilish grin on the man’s face.

Nightshade again heard a soft step at the door and knew that cunning, eager ears were there.

“You won’t buy it, eh?” leered Sam.

“Not from you. It is your duty to tell what you know for the benefit of the scheme.”

“And see you take the lion’s share, leaving me the picked bones? Never!”

The steps receded now, and in another moment there was heard, directly over Major Nightshade’s head, a light tapping.

He appeared to pay no attention to it, but all the same he did not let one of the signals escape him.

“Come back to-morrow,” said the Major.

“Now or never!”

“I can’t buy anything to-night. Come here at ten to-morrow.”

Sam saw that the prize was slipping through his fingers.

“Fifteen thousand now and the secret is yours.”

“To-morrow!” as sternly rejoined Nightshade.

The seller lost a little of his assurance. Should he drop a little lower in his terms?

“What if I sell out to the detectives?” he suggested.

“Take it to them if you care to.”

“You won’t trade to-night at all?”

“Not to-night.”

Everything was at an end.

“At ten to-morrow, then,” sulkily assented Cerberus, and the next moment he had bowed himself out of the house.

Sam had barely reached the sidewalk when the door was flung open and Vera Consadine appeared.

She had heard all—her countenance told this.

“Follow the traitor!” commanded the Major, pointing to the door. “You have heard his scheme. It may be simple blackmail, with a lie for its foundation, or Lee really may be alive. I must know which. Follow.”

Vera turned to depart, but the chief called her back.

“You carry another dagger, don’t you?”

She significantly touched her bosom.

“That’s right. If he gets into your path, you know what to do. He is a traitor now.”

Vera was gone.

On the street she caught sight of the flitting figure of Sam Cerberus, and took the shadow trail.

Not for years had this couple met face to face.

While both belonged to the same cabal, Vera had avoided meeting Cerberus as if she feared the man.

But now she was his trailer, now she was after him with the keenest of eyes and with a dagger hidden in her bosom.

If Sam went to the hiding place of the man whom he called Marvin Lee, she would know it.

If he turned on her and tried to defeat her espionage, there might follow the gleam of a blade and the death throes of a foolish man.

Cerberus went first to the house of Jonas South, the taxidermist.

Vera saw him enter, and watched the door.

It was well past midnight, so she knew that he would not remain there long.

Forty minutes later the door reopened to let Sam out, and from the opposite side of the street she again watched him.

Now he would surely go to the house occupied by this man, who was the danger point in the game.

Sam led Vera a merry chase, first heading toward the ferries, and then whirling suddenly about and plunging into a street which promised to reward her.

She saw him stop in front of a building and lean against the window as if listening to sounds on the inside.

Had she discovered the home of Marvin Lee?

For some little time Cerberus became a part of the house, as it were; then he moved off.

But just as Vera Consadine took the shadow trail again he whirled and came back.

The supreme moment in the woman’s life was before her!

“What if he sees me?” flashed through her mind. “What if he even suspects that Harold sent me after him? He will kill me in my tracks.”

An alley offered her asylum, and in another minute she had vanished.

All was darkness where she stood, with panting heart, listening to the footsteps which approached.

He had not seen her, and she was safe.

Safe? Alas, for human hopes!

Sam Cerberus, with the instinct of a hound, came down the pavement and suddenly stopped at the mouth of the alley.

Vera held her breath.

He was within a few feet of her, yet did not see her. Fate was kind to her still.

“I thought so!” cried the traitor, as his hand shot out and closed on the shrinking woman. “I thought I had you or some one else on my track.”

Vera was dragged by a strong arm into the light of the nearest lamp, where, for an instant, he held her at arm’s length, as he grinned his delight.

“Ho! the same old face. Don’t you know that I’ve made several attempts to get a peep at it? Why, woman, we used to be friends.”

Vera kept her lips welded, but looked defiance at Cerberus, while her hand seemed to rest near the hidden hilt of the dagger.

“Following me, weren’t you? He told you to play tracker, didn’t he? Ah, what a cool head he is!”

“You should have played fair with him,” retorted Vera. “You know that if he fails, you fail as well.”

“Do I? By Jove! I can build a fortune in a night. I don’t have to spend years in laying the foundation. I can walk into the headquarters of the police, and, with the inspector to listen for half an hour, I can feather my nest and become a hero.”

“Coward!”

“Oh, yes; you can say that here. You don’t look like the old Korah very much, but you’re no one else. This is why you never gave me a good look at you. This is why you always avoided me and never came to our consultations when I was there.”

“You know I never liked you.”

“I do know it. You were a mischief brewer on the plantation. You drew Eric Lee, or Harlan Hope, into the toils, and you made it possible for him to hang for a crime he never committed.”

To this Vera made no reply, and the face of the man came close to hers.

“You thought I would lead you to him, didn’t you? However, for once you have failed, woman.”

“You deliberately sell out your master.”

“I sell wherever I can make money. It’s the root of all evil, but I’m fond of it.”

He laughed, but there was no merriment in the act for Vera Consadine.

“I don’t live far from here,” said Sam. “I would like to talk over old times with you. You and I needn’t go down with a sinking ship, Korah.”

“How’s that?”

“I say we needn’t drown with the rest of them. But, come and hear my proposition.”

She did not assent nor refuse, but allowed him to take her away, all the time watching him with the eye of a hawk.

Three squares from the spot Cerberus conducted his prisoner up a flight of stairs and into a small room, where he turned on the gas.

“Is this your home?” asked Vera, looking around.

“Here’s where I live.”

“Alone?”

“Alone.”

Her temper seemed to change.

She talked freely, as if she had forgotten her mission, but all the time it was uppermost in her mind.

They talked about times on the Virginian plantation, about the mysterious murder which had sent Harlan Hope adrift; they compared notes on that mystery, and seemed to agree.

Then Sam came back to the proposition which he had made to Major Nightshade.

He had discovered that the twin brother, Marvin Lee, was not dead, that he was even then living in the city, and he could lay his hand on him at any time.

He told Vera, who appeared to assent to all he said, that the game being played by Nightshade was full of pitfalls. He showed her how the police might go back and trace him from the time when, as Dandy Finch, of Virginia, he had enacted a prominent part in the murder mystery of the plantation, and how much better it would be for him and her to make a league, offensive and defensive, and sell out to Marvin Lee.

All this time he sat before her, her bright eyes sparkling with the light of other days while she drank in every word.

All at once she arose and stood over him.

“It’s a bold scheme,” said she. “It may be a better one than that which we have harbored and fooled with.”

“It’s a thousand times better!” asserted he. “Think of it. We can either sell out to Marvin Lee or to the girl, Ruby. What a trump we have in our hands.”

“But there’s one obstacle.”

“Well?”

“There’s the detective!”

Sam waved his hand and exclaimed:

“He troubles no one. I have fixed him. I met him not long ago and he is silenced.”

“You haven’t killed Gideon Gale?”

“I say the detective will track no more!”

“Then dead men tell no tales?”

“That’s as true as gospel in this case, woman.”

She seemed to reflect a moment, and her look softened.

“When we cut loose from Major Nightshade we make our fortunes,” continued the man.

"When you are dead the traitor betrays no one."

He saw her countenance grow white and ghastly. He saw the hand which dived into her bosom, and then he tried to rise, but was pushed back into the chair.

"Dead traitors betray no one!" muttered Vera, as five minutes later she came out of the house with the tread of one born to indifference.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE TERRIBLE VISITOR.

If Sam Cerberus could have seen Gideon Gale while he interviewed Major Nightshade in the latter's house, he would have doubted his ability to finish a man supposed to be in his way.

The Quickstep Detective, eager to discover something definite about the man who had thrown the lawyer into a faint by the mere display of his face, had turned in that direction.

He had left the office on Broadway with Amos, whom the Terrier was to shadow, and when night came he turned his face toward the house, the address of which he already had.

If the twin brother of the dead lawyer had turned up, the detective wanted to see him.

Gotham Gid had not forgotten his former call in search of this man, nor his encounter with the Widow Shell, who had repulsed, but not satisfied him.

Even while Sam Cerberus scrutinized Nightshade's face the detective was near the house.

He found it as quiet as before, but there was a light in the main room, front, so he tripped up the steps and tried the door.

He, of course, expected to find it locked, but it opened at his push, and he entered.

He would not have been surprised if the widow had come forward to confront him, but she did not.

Gideon advanced to the door on the left and halted there.

He felt that some one was beyond the portal, that he was about to solve a mystery, and he stood there a full minute while he listened.

Not a sound came from the room.

"Here goes!" and the ferret turned the knob and pressed the door inward, to stand, the next moment, in the presence of the gray-beard and Ruby Hope.

For such a scene Gideon Gale was not prepared; it was the last thing he would have expected, but there she was staring at him while at the table sat the man.

Gray-beard made a quick movement, as if to retreat, but Ruby put out her hand and detained him, at the same time rising and interposing her body between him and the unannounced intruder.

"Not yet, Mr. Gale," cried the girl. "For my sake be so kind as to leave us alone."

The detective smiled.

"You forget, miss, that as a man of duty and at your command, I have stepped upon this trail to follow it in the interests of justice to the end."

"But, leave us alone, or let him retire."

Gideon, who stood between the pleading girl and the door, did not move nor make an effort toward complying with Ruby's request.

"Let him remain, child," suddenly spoke the man. "I think the time has come."

The fair girl stepped to the side of the graybeard.

"Sit down, Gideon Gale," the man invited.

The detective dropped into an empty chair while Ruby stood at the man's shoulder.

"You have come to see me?"

"I am here to talk with you," answered Gideon.

"Who sent you?"

"No one. I have come to say what I believe."

The old man turned to the girl and held out his hand.

"You can go home. I can talk with this gentleman."

She hesitated.

"Go, my child. You can do no good by staying, and I assure you that all will be well."

She bent over him, and spoke in low tones. The ferret did not catch the import of her words, for she talked rapidly and as suddenly rose and swept toward the door.

"You are not afraid, child?" asked gray-beard.

"No, not afraid."

The shadower saw how wistfully the man's gaze followed Ruby to the door and how he seemed to breathe hard as she vanished.

For an hour voices might have been heard in the room, and when they ceased the door opened, and the Quickstep Detective stood in the hall.

In the room itself, his face buried in his hands, sat the man with the gray beard.

If he was Marvin Lee, he must have told his story, and have been crushed by the telling.

Gotham Gid knew.

He walked from the house, gained the street, and was plodding on once more.

Had he but tarried a little while he would have seen Marvin Lee come out.

A soft hat had been pulled over his eyes, and his collar was around his jaws.

He looked around him with a good deal of caution, and then started off rapidly.

Jonas South, in his little workshop, alone with his frogs, heard some one in the outer hall.

"It's the woman," he decided. "She's come back to see what I have done with the detective. Ah, the accursed dice!"

He turned his stool and watched the door.

At sight of the visitor who entered he started up and dropped the half-mounted frog.

"My God! You?"

It was the man with the gray beard!

Pausing in the middle of the room, his finger covered Jonas.

"Go back to your bench!" he commanded.

The taxidermist obeyed, but with fear and trembling.

"It's a fine game you play, Jonas," continued gray-beard.

"What game?"

"No lies! No deception! You must have picked up this business somewhere, for when I saw you last you were hunting men, not mounting frogs."

There was a perceptible tremor in Jonas' nether lip, but he did not speak.

"Yes, you were hunting men. Don't you remember how you searched the Black Swamp with the dogs—how you made it appear that no one but Eric Lee could have killed old Manoah?"

"I?"

"No one but you, villainous wretch! You stood ready to swear his neck into the noose. At the beck and call of your master you were ready for anything."

"I didn't know I ever was anybody's slave."

"You belonged body and soul to another. You couldn't stand in the light of day and say that you were your own master."

"You have no mercy!"

"When did you ever have any? When you stood on the edge of the swamp with the corpse of old Manoah behind you, knowing who had done the deed. Did you become merciful then?"

"I—I—"

"Silence!" commanded the other, with almost savage sternness.

Jonas subsided like a cowed cur.

"You are still in the employ of your old master," continued the old man. "You serve him yet with the same faithfulness which characterized your service in years past."

He advanced a step, and his looks seemed powerful enough to smite the taxidermist to the floor.

"You have writing materials in this room, Jonas?"

"I have."

"Get them and bring them to your bench."

Jonas pushed back his stool and went over to a cupboard set in the wall, to soon return to the smooth workbench with pen and ink and a few sheets of paper.

There was no color on his face now; it had fled at the old man's entrance, and had not returned, and he was trembling like one shaken by the palsy.

"Now, sit down," was commanded, "and write. Begin at the beginning, but don't be tedious!"

"At the beginning? Then you want my confession—want me to detail what I saw that night?"

"Yes, just that. I am your master now! So, write, and tell the whole truth, as you value your miserable life!"

Jonas South turned to the task and began to write immediately, as if eager to obey.

A pair of keen eyes watched him like a hawk, and the hand of gray-beard dropped suddenly upon his shoulder.

"There, don't be prolix, Jonas," he said. "I want a plain, crisp statement!"

For almost an hour Jonas, who was not very handy with the pen, worked laboriously at the task.

As he threw aside a page it was picked up and held by the person at his side.

"Now, your name," enjoined the gray-beard, when Jonas South paused half way down the last page.

The signature was attached, and the pen fell from the writer's hand.

"Thanks, Jonas! I thought you would tell the truth—under certain circumstances. It was well you did!"

"What would you have done if I had stubbornly refused?" asked the taxidermist venturesomely.

"I would have finished your career of usefulness in this world," was the impressive answer.

With the sheets doubled in his hand, gray-beard stepped toward the door.

"You won't be molested here if you care to remain. But if you ever try to betray me—if you attempt treason after penning what you have—you may have a last experience with the law which will end your career here on earth."

"You can trust me."

"See that I can. There is to be a gathering of all threads until every one is held by the hand of justice."

"You mean you are to become your own avenger?"

"Not entirely so."

"I think I would have known your voice without the least trouble," remarked Jonas.

"And my face, what of it?"

"The beard conceals that; it gives you quite a different look, and would deceive the best of them."

The old man placed his hand on the knob.

"Once more, Jonas," said he. "The day of light and of vengeance is near at hand. The blow must fall. Time was when an old man sat in the shadow of a crime and dared not open his mouth. You remember how the aged father of Eric and Marvin Lee, bowed down with the weight of years, went to his grave, while his sons foolishly—as it afterward became known—lost their identity in different parts of the country."

There was no answer.

"You had a hand in that crime, Jonas South. You served your master, and if you speak—if you betray me—you shall hang with that same master!"

That was all. Jonas heard the door open and shut; his head whirled, and he fell to the floor.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A COOL CREATURE.

"Well, you found him?"

"I did."

"You did not lose sight of him for a minute?"

"I tracked him down. There, let that suffice," and the hand of Vera fell upon Major Nightshade's arm.

A significant look passed between the pair; then the woman left the room and the plotter was alone.

Vera had come back from tracking the man who had asked twenty thousand dollars for the Marvin Lee secret, and she believed that Nightshade understood her report.

No one had seen her upon his trail, no person had watched her enter the house with Sam Cerberus, and if she had left him there incapable of ever again giving any one trouble, it was for the good of the scheme, and she had a right to keep the dread secret to herself.

Early the next morning there came to police headquarters a report that a man had been found murdered in a small room in a certain part of the city.

A boy, who said he had seen him come and go from the house for some time had made the discovery, and the Inspector sent his best man thither.

They discovered the man still occupying the chair in which he had met his fate—the thin face ghastly and the hands drawn and cold.

There were no signs of a struggle, and no clews left behind by the assassin.

Three blows with a knife, and the deed was accomplished.

He seemed totally unknown to the police until there entered the room, some hours afterward, one who made a startling discovery.

Gotham Gid it was who came, and he knew that the dead man was Sam Cerberus.

The room was left to the Quickstep Ferret, and he began to search it for clews.

It was a vain search, for the hand which had done the deed had left none behind, and the mystery seemed to deepen while the ferret looked.

Over on the window sill where the sunlight fell the detective found at last a sign which had hitherto escaped him.

Three fingers had been laid on the dust-covered sill, and the imprints were yet there.

Gideon bent over this discovery and inspected it with the cleverness of an expert—the sagacity of an adept.

The prints of three fingers are not much, but may be proofs strong enough to tighten the noose round the neck of the guilty!

Detective Gid measured the finger marks and at last went away, leaving them as they were.

It was not likely they would be disturbed, for the body would soon be removed to the Morgue and then the place would be locked.

One hour later the Gotham expert might have been seen watching a woman who emerged from a house not far from the spot where he first caught sight of her.

He followed her down several streets, and at last saw her enter a modest restaurant.

It was late breakfast hour, and the woman was quite alone.

The Quickstep Detective entered and stood alongside the counter looking covertly at a woman who had just seated herself at a table further down the room.

He kept between her and the door, waiting for her to sip the coffee which had been brought her, and he did not seem to care when she finished.

She came toward him at last.

"It is Vera," said the detective to himself. "It is the old 'Korah' of other days."

She came toward him, paid her score at the cashier's desk, and then passed out.

But once did she glance at her shadower, and their eyes met for an instant.

Gideon pushed out after her.

"Korah?"

He did not utter the name in a loud tone, but hardly above a whisper, yet she heard it.

She started quickly and looked at him.

In another moment the man of many trails was up with her, and his gaze seemed to be reading her inmost thoughts.

"I want to talk with you," he said.

"With me, sir?" there was haughtiness in the woman's voice, but she did not move away.

"With you! Fortunately we are not far from a quiet place, where we will not be molested, and thither I will conduct you for the conversation."

Vera seemed to swallow hard, but she did not hesitate.

Did she know the man who had run her down?

Was she aware that the danger point in the game had been reached, and that she stood face to face with the sworn avenger of the crime in the old lawyer's house?

They walked away, side by side, and in a little while the detective stood at the door of his own room.

There for the first time the face of Vera gave out signs of expected danger.

"This is your place?" she said, looking at him.

"I live here, madam," was the reply, and as the door opened the ferret waved his companion into the room.

Vera did not hesitate, but crossed the threshold as a quick flash came to her eyes, and in another second she stood in the middle of the room, looking at Gideon Gale.

He had entrapped her, and now he was to achieve a brilliant victory, or be baffled by one worthy of his steel.

"You were out last night?"
She did not speak.

"You refuse to admit it, I see."
"I have refused to admit nothing."

"You were on the street, and you went home after you had accomplished your purpose."

She seemed to move toward him with the quickness of a tigress, but all at once she checked herself and fell back to a chair.

"Don't you think you have served the master spirit of the plot long enough, Korah?"

"Why call me Korah?" asked the woman. "You seem to have picked up the wrong person."

Gideon, for answer, opened a drawer in the table at his hand and drew forth a dagger with a black ivory handle.

The gaze of Vera fell upon it.

"This is Korah's dagger," said he, as he quickly removed the hilt and shook out upon the table the twisted paper he had found there. "I found this dagger in the house of Jonas South after your departure, when you had failed to kill the man who held you against the wall. It is Korah's dagger. The paper calls you 'Korah, the Invincible.'"

She did not deny or protest; she only threw her head back and stood before him like a wrongly accused queen.

"It is not yours, then?" spoke Gideon.

"It used to be mine, but the paper—I repudiate that. You are very clever, sir."

"Do you think the writing is my work?"

"Why should it be mine?" she demanded. "Do you think I would reveal the ownership of the dagger by any such means? Let me see."

She picked up the paper and read its contents.

"Is this what you brought me here for?"

"Partly. But I wanted to talk about the little episode of last night."

"Go on."

"You forgot that you left something in the room where you brought the man to bay."

There was a visible start on Vera's part, and she gave the detective a sharp glance.

"I leave something behind?" she repeated. "You must think I committed a crime last night."

"You found him; you left him alone in his room. But you also left behind you the clew that tells."

"What's that?"

"Perhaps you ought to see it."

"Ah! you haven't fetched it with you?"

"It is still in the room, but he is not there!"

"And you want me to accompany you to this unknown place? You want me to go with you and convict myself of some dark crime for your edification? Sir, you don't know the woman you have called Korah!"

"You refuse to go, then?"

Vera seemed to reflect.

She was in the toils, but, if she went away with this detective might she not effect her escape by giving him the slip somewhere in the streets?

"I defy you to prove me guilty of any crime," she asserted. "You are like all your class; you make clews where none exist; you must succeed in some way, for failure is disgrace!"

Then, after a second's silence, she continued:

"I will go with you. Where is it?"

The Quickstep Detective knew that he was dealing with a shrewd, determined woman.

She came toward him as she asked the question, and looked him calmly in the eye.

"Where is it?" she repeated. "I have an errand in another part of the city, and I can't be detained very long."

"Come then!"

Gideon Gale and his companion left the house and in a short time were on the streets, attracting no undue attention.

Woman-like, Vera watched him attentively.

She had resolved to escape at the first opportunity, but the chosen time did not come.

She was perfectly composed now, and the game in hand could not have been better played, so far as she was concerned.

In the course of time they reached the house in which Sam Cerberus had been found by the boy, and this they entered.

Gideon glanced at Vera as they entered, but not a muscle quivered, not a sign of disquiet was betrayed.

"She may stand the test like a savage queen," he thought, as they went upstairs.

Back into the room, which she had left the night before went Vera Consadine, with the detective behind her.

The chair at the table was empty now.

"Is this the spot?" she asked, turning to the ferret and speaking with desperate coolness.

"It was here," was the answer. "But this is what I want to show you, madam."

Gideon advanced across the chamber and approached the window with the dust-marks on the sill.

With a woman's curiosity she followed, and stopped near the sill.

"What is here?" she asked.

"The prints of Vera Consadine's fingers!" he retorted, looking up into her face, while he pointed to the marks on the casing.

She seemed to smile as she leaned forward and saw the prints which had been discovered by the observant shadower.

"These my finger-marks?" she said, proceeding to place her fingers deftly into the prints. "Is this all the proof you have, Gideon Gale?"

Her question ended with a derisive laugh, and she fell back like one about to depart.

"Stay!" exclaimed the Quickstep Detective. "You are under arrest. I have more proofs than the marks on the window sill."

"You have? Under arrest? For what?"

"For the murder of Sam Cerberus, in this very room!"

She did not move; she did not tremble; she looked into the detective's face and laughed again.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LIVING DEAD.

Gotham Gid knew that he was dealing with a dangerous woman.

"For the murder of Sam Cerberus?" repeated Vera, standing erect, in the middle of the room.

"Yonder are the prints of your fingers. The ring which you wore fitted the impression to a T."

She walked over to the sill again and bent over it.

The detective saw her fingers sink once more into the dust and he leaned forward.

"It just fits," admitted Vera, glancing over her shoulder. "You would make that mark hang me, I see."

"You know what it means."

"Well, there! Where is it now?" and the hand of the woman suddenly swept the tell-tale impression out of existence, and she turned upon the ferret with a triumphant flash in her eyes.

She could not have been checked, no matter how quick the man had been.

With one sweep of her hand she had obliterated every vestige of the marks in the dust, and was now victorious.

"Do you want me still?" she demanded.
"You belong to the law now."

"I killed him!"

It was a frank confession, and her lips closed with the words with an audible sound.

"But prove it, sir detective."

Gideon reached forth and caught her arm.

"You may not know that there was a spy at your heels last night. You must have forgotten to look behind you. You should have been more cautious, woman!"

"Was it you? I thought—"

"You thought Sam Cerberus had finished me, eh? You should not forget that the coolest of them fail to kill nowadays, sometimes."

"I know that, now."

Vera Consadine walked toward the door and the detective suddenly placed himself before her as if to bar her progress.

All at once her right hand flew to her bosom, and the next moment the man of many trails saw flashing in mid-air above the woman's head a keen-edged dagger.

"Stand back!"

The rage of a Medusa seemed to have taken possession of the woman.

She advanced a step.

"I am going," she went on. "You must not stop me, Gideon Gale."

She threw out her hand and the knife came close to the detective's face.

One grasp the ferret made; the blade cut through his sleeve, and, as she involuntarily drew back, she gained the door and threw it wide.

"The game is lost!" she exclaimed.

"It is lost, woman," echoed the detective.

Gideon heard her footsteps on the stairs; heard her bounding from step to step, and when he looked down her figure was vanishing into the street.

"Gone!"

The Quickstep Detective followed down the flight. The sunlight filled the street, and he caught sight of her fleeting form.

Time enough to take her yet, he concluded.

But at that moment she sprang into a cab, which she had just hailed, and quickly whisked out of sight.

There was no cab handy by which the ferret could keep track of the woman, and he was forced to see her vanish.

As for Vera, still holding the dagger along her sleeve, she was being driven over the streets of New York at almost breakneck speed.

The horse did not go fast enough for her.

"Faster! faster! Twenty dollars if you take me home within five minutes. Take the shortest cut," she called out to the Jehu on the box.

The man whipped up anew and the steed strained his strength to the limit.

But all at once there came a crash—a sound of splintered wheels, and the horse, thrown back upon his haunches, stopped.

The man jumped down and sprang to the door of the cab.

"Did you get the worst of it?" he asked, as he opened it.

The next second he fell back with a cry, and looked wildly around upon the swelling crowd.

"The lady!" he said, pointing to the open cab.

"Why, she's dead!"

There was tumult at once, and the policeman who pushed his way through the crowd looked into the vehicle and saw the body of Vera Consadine in a heap on the floor.

They lifted her out, and as the body was taken from the cab, a dagger, unsheathed, fell from her hand.

Then all saw the ghastly look on her face; they saw, too, the drops of red that stained the bosom of her dress, and some one said "Murder!" in loud tones.

Whatever had happened, the woman of the red drama was dead.

An hour later her body lay on the cold slabs of the Morgue and the handsome face was turned to the ceiling.

Meantime, Major Nightshade waited in his luxurious room as if for a guest who did not come.

The New York mystery appeared uneasy.

More than once he arose and walked to the window, where he looked through the well-drawn blinds upon the street.

The day was passing.

High noon came, and still Major Nightshade waited.

Anxiously he watched the clock, and seemed to count the very minutes.

"Why not?" he said, aloud, to himself. "Why not see what has become of Jonas?"

He went out.

Jonas South, in his little workshop, was alone.

He heard some one in the hall and the door opened to admit Major Nightshade.

Perhaps Jonas thought that gray-beard was coming back.

He uttered a cry the moment he caught sight of Major Nightshade, and the next moment the chief of the plot stood at his side.

"This is not your mission now," cried the Major, looking at the grotesque, half-mounted frogs that were to be seen here and there. "You drew the starred ace."

What could Jonas say?

He had betrayed this man; he had written out the confession of the past for graybeard.

"You heard me, Jonas?"

"I heard you."

"You got the starred ace. Did you carry out its mission?"

"I did not."

"You have betrayed us."

Silence.

"Did you look for him?"

"I did."

"Where?—in this room?"

"Out yonder."

"And failed to find him?"

"You must know that he is a man of consummate cunning."

"What of that? The drawer of the starred ace allows no one to stop for anything."

"I did my best."

"And you are here to tell me that you have failed."

"You must also remember that I was to have a little time."

"How much do you want, Jonas?"

"Time enough to find him."

Major Nightshade fell back a pace and for half a minute glared at the man at the bench.

"Till to-night at midnight," he then announced. "You can have no longer time, and from now until then your actions will be watched. You can't escape us, Jonas."

The half-cowering man at the bench trembled and great drops of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Till midnight! If the detective is alive then, your own life pays the forfeit."

Out he went.

Jonas sat still a while longer, and then slowly left the chair.

"Good-bye to this bit of business," he cried, sweeping all the frogs from the bench. "I am done with it. It is now flight or death. I curse the day that saw me linked to this fiend incarnate. I hate the mother who brought me into the world. I am undone. I have confessed to him and I am still in the hands of Major Nightshade."

He surveyed the chamber, and then threw on his coat.

In another second he was at the door, and the next he was beyond it, the key having clicked in the lock.

It was the last time he would ever lock the door of the little workshop.

Jonas went down-stairs and felt the warm sunshine on his cheeks.

"Not so fast, Jonas!" was spoken behind him.

The taxidermist stopped.

"You were going off, weren't you?" said a person, coming up. "I don't want to harm you, Jonas, though you sent me pretty near to the boundary line of life. You choked me nearly to death. But I want to say that your old little enemy is here."

"My little enemy?" echoed Jonas.

"The overseer."

"When did you see him?"

"I met him on the Battery. He nearly killed me, but the revolver failed to make an angel of old Cholly."

Jonas uttered a strange, weird laugh.

"A pretty angel you would make!" said he. "So he is here—my old enemy?"

"Yes, the man who long ago swore that he would get even with you for taking from him the woman called—"

"Mother Trumps, eh? Let him have her. He is welcome to her, now."

"But mebbe that won't satisfy him, Jonas."

"Then, for Heaven's sake, give me an asylum, Cholly."

"You don't mean that? You don't appeal to me for mercy?"

"With all my heart, Cholly! Save me until night!"

Old Cholly drew back and looked in amazement at the man who thus placed his life in his power.

"This way, Jonas," said he, finally. "I owe you one, but this hand is not against you now."

Jonas pulled his hat over his brow and permitted Cholly to lead him away.

"Wait; I had a caller a while ago," said the old man, as he paused at the door of his den and looked at Jonas. "He was here to see me and was to come back."

"Do I know him?" asked Jonas.

"You will."

The door was opened, and Cholly pushed his companion across the threshold.

Jonas South stopped just beyond the step and gazed at a man who had turned from the window.

The gray beard that covered his face dropped below his chin and the eyes struck Jonas as being full of fire and very piercing.

"Well, Jonas, how are you?"

The taxidermist shrank from the outstretched hand, and a sudden chill shook his figure.

"What, don't you know me? Have you forgotten the night you hunted for me around the Black Swamp?"

The hand went up to the speaker's face and the gray beard fell.

Then arose a cry of terror, and Jonas South, staggering back, turned white and seemed to clutch at the empty air.

A grin suffused old Cholly's face; he ardently enjoyed the scene.

"My God! Marvin Lee!" cried Jonas, staring at the almost smooth face thus revealed.

"No, Jonas, for once mistaken. Not Marvin, but Eric—Harlan Hope, the victim of a conspiracy."

There was no answer, for Jonas South's teeth chattered.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GIDEON FINDS HIS MAN.

Was it true that the dead had come back?

Could it be possible that Harlan Hope, supposed to have been murdered in his mansion, actually stood before him?

Startling as the revelation was, Jonas South did not have to look twice.

It was Marvin Lee's brother, instead of Marvin himself; it was Harlan Hope, the lawyer.

"You know me, Jonas?" said he.

"I know you, but in the name of Heaven, how came you back from the dead?"

A smile came over the lawyer's face.

"You will listen to that story some other time," was the reply. "When you gave me the confession you supposed you were placing it in the hands of Marvin, but not so."

"I see it now."

"Marvin is dead," answered Harlan Hope. "You may guess the rest."

There was no reply, but the gaze of Jonas South was riveted upon the man before him.

Half an hour later a person standing in the middle of a room in another part of the city seemed to be waiting for some one who did not come.

If was verging on toward evening, and the shadows were long on the street.

"She should have been back by this time," he said, aloud. "She did not expect to remain away as long as this and—"

The bell rang sharply.

Major Nightshade—it was the head of the plot—went to the door, but stopped in the hall.

"She would not have to ring," said he. "She has the key, but perhaps it is a message from her."

He opened the door, and a man whom he did not know put a folded paper in his hand.

He clutched it and shut the door in the messenger's face.

In the parlor again he opened the sheet and ran his eyes over it.

It was a scrawl, and he lost color while he read it.

"Korah is dead. She killed herself in a hack a while ago and lies at the Morgue."

Major Nightshade caught his breath.

"Dead? Killed herself in a cab?" he stammered. "Then he must have been close behind her. Jonas, the coward, failed, and she could not escape the hands of Gideon Gale."

He crumpled the paper in his hand and threw it into the grate.

The plotter—conspirator—human vulture, knew that he had been driven to the wall.

He looked toward the door as if he expected to see it open to his hunters.

Major Nightshade seemed to grow into a statue in the room where he had his lair—his ill-omened nest.

"It has failed. I can't put Amos Shartle into the toils now. I can't nerve Jonas South's arm. I can't depend on Sam. Vera is dead. I am the only one of the gang."

He seemed to speak with a terrible intent, and looking to a mirror he crossed to it and stood before it.

"Why not?"

He drew forth a silver mounted revolver and his hand wrapped itself about the butt like a vulture's grip.

"If Iva saw it all, she will surely tell now," he went on. "I can't find the girl, and therefore can't still her tongue; but why did she keep the truth back?"

He looked down at the weapon and then at the reflection of his face in the long mirror.

There were footsteps in the corridor outside, and he turned in that direction.

"They are here!" said he, facing the door, with the revolver leveled.

His face was terribly calm, now; there was no sign of trepidation—no fear—no unsteadiness of nerve.

He stood as erect as a soldier and his hand did not tremble.

"The man who comes in dies in his shoes!" he said. "It is the only way. I shall die game—Nightshade to the last!"

The knob turned and the door slowly opened.

The man's eyes looked over the glistening barrel; in another half-second there would be a dead detective on the threshold!

But—Nightshade was unnerved at last! He fell back with parted lips and wholly palid face.

Who stood before him?

"Heavens! the living dead!" cried the Major.

"Your old acquaintance, Eric Lee, or Harlan Hope," was the answer, as the tall figure of the old lawyer straightened before his enemy.

Behind the man who had entered the room was to be seen another face, agleam with triumph.

Gideon Gale, the Quickstep Detective, was there.

The man of many trails had reached the end of the last one and he could afford to gaze at his victim with pride in his victory.

"It was your blunder, Major," reminded Harlan Hope, looking at the villain upon whose face was a look of inquiry. "That day I had my brother Marvin, whom I had discovered in New York, come to my house while I went into retirement in or-

der the better to meet you and your diabolical schemes. He came to my house, taking possession of it as myself, to the complete deception of the little household."

"That night your hand struck. The hand fell upon his head, not mine, as was intended, and Iva, looking down over the transom, saw much of the deed. But the girl believed that I was the victim. She felt that the blow had silenced me, and the secret she tried to keep was forced from her afterward. Why did she tell the false story after the crime? My friend Gideon here, knows why, now. He has found Iva; the girl has been discovered over in Brooklyn, and she is ready to tell everything.

"Had you taken pains to examine the hands of your victim after the murder you would have noticed that the tip of one of the thumbs was missing, and if your mind ran back a few years you would have recalled the shooting match in Virginia where Marvin accidentally lost a part of his thumb. The discovery in the house, after the murder, startled Amos Shartle, my partner, because he had seen my hands thousands of times and had not noticed a maimed thumb. It was really the only thing which at times made him doubt that I was the victim of the crime.

"But all is over now, Dandy Finch. You came hither to play out the deepest and most damnable game man ever hatched in his fertile brain. You gathered about you some of the old spirits of the plantation. You found Sam Cerberus, you came across Jonas South, you associated with you the keenest and most unscrupulous of women, Korah, the Vera of to-day. You wanted my fortune. You wanted to rob my only child, Ruby. You have blackmailed me for years, and I more than suspected the source. But that crime on the plantation was not mine; the hand that strangled old Manoah belonged to another, and you know the secret of that night. Yet Marvin and I suffered for it. Vera lies dead at the Morgue, having killed herself in a cab, after taking the life of Sam Cerberus, and Jonas has told the story of the old crime—told it in writing.

"You need not pose as Marvin. He is dead, and I am the living avenger. Gideon Gale, you have tracked this human vulture down. He belongs to you!"

The detective advanced and his hand fell upon Major Nightshade's arm.

At last!

New York had a real sensation when it knew that Harlan Hope was not dead—that the murdered man was his twin brother, Marvin, whom he had brought to his home from his hiding place, not with the intention of sacrificing him to the enemy, but for the purpose of giving himself an opportunity to vindicate his name, and in the end baffle the blackmailers, with Major Nightshade, or Dandy Finch, as their instigator and chief.

Iva came back, and with Harlan Hope's consent told the story of the night of the tenth.

She had seen Nightshade deal the blow after Sam Cerberus' departure, and, at the time, she thought her employer was the victim; but, hating Sam, whom she had encountered some time before, she at first resolved to fasten the crime on him, hence her first story about the lean-faced man.

But she soon learned that Harlan Hope was not the victim, and the lawyer easily prevailed upon the maid to keep his secret; hence her flight, and startling retraction later.

The Terrier failed to implicate Amos Shartle in any way and in due time he became the husband of Ruby Hope, while the old lawyer, free from the schemes of the guilty, and no longer believed to be guilty of the Virginian crime, which Major Nightshade had also confessed, came down to the Broadway office as of old.

Jonas South was permitted to vanish after he had given in his testimony against Major Nightshade and he did not stand upon the order of his going.

Crowley Creepers and Molly Brass continued to live in Mother Trumps' old place, while Mother Trumps herself,

Jonas' cast-off wife, came now and then to see them.

As for the great conspirator, who, but for the hand of the Quickstep Detective, aided by Harlan Hope, would have come forward as Marvin Lee, the long lost brother—he heard the stern sentence of the law pronounced against him, and turned from the bench with the death knell ringing in his ears.

At the door of the court-room he turned and looked back to see gazing at him triumphantly, though with the calmest of faces, the man who never let a quarry escape him—Gideon Gale!

"It was my mistake!" grated Major Nightshade. "I killed the wrong man, but curse the startling resemblance! It would have deceived the best of them!"

Few pitied him; not a hand was lifted to save him from his merited doom, which he met with the coolness of the born desperado, and left behind him the memory of the daring game which he had played and—lost!

THE END.

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